

## **The Golden Girl by I've Got Nerve**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Adventure, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** OC, Steve H.

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2018-07-06 16:20:04

**Updated:** 2019-11-26 14:46:56

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 15:04:22

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 26

**Words:** 115,726

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** This is Steve/OFC So far I have all the seasons planned out. I plan on stopping at the end of season 3 because it seems like a good stopping point.

# 1. Chapter 1

This is my newest interest! Stranger Things/Steve Harrington. This is my disclaimer: I don't own the show or any of the characters that you recognize here. I do, however, own Jessica Henderson. Yes, it's a Henderson sister story, and will eventually be Steve/OFC. If you've liked my other stuff . . . give this a try.

## Chapter One

"I'll take your X-Men 134," Jessica Henderson heard from her bedroom window. She knew the voice belonged to Will Byers, one of her younger brother, Dustin's, friends.

Dustin had been at another one of his friend's houses that night and was obviously just getting home. It was a little after eight, which meant it was a little past his curfew getting home, but their mother wasn't really strict so he wasn't going to get in trouble.

Jessica went to the window, which faced the street of their two-story house, and watched as her brother put his bike away, which meant it was parked against the side of the house, and made his way inside. She heard as he said hi to their mother and began tromping up the stairs only to stop at her doorway, which was always open to him.

"Hey, sis," he said.

"Hey, have fun at Mike's playing Dragons and Dungeons?"

"It's Dungeons and Dragons," he said, rolling his eyes because he knew she'd purposefully gotten the name wrong. "And yes. We didn't get to finish, though."

"Too bad."

Jessica knew absolutely nothing about the game Dustin and his friends played, but she did know he was very into it and so she tried to take an interest. She was just glad her brother had found a group of friends to be a part of. Her family hadn't always lived in Hawkins, Indiana, so she was relieved that she and her brother had found

people to hang with.

She'd met her brother's D&D group and she liked all of them well enough. Will was her favorite out of Dustin's friends. Will was quiet and shy and the least likely to cause a problem. Dustin and Will usually rode their bikes home together because Dustin's house was on the way to Will's.

"You guys want to go to the arcade tomorrow? I have to work after school, so if you want I can take you as long as you get a ride home from someone else?"

"Sure, that'd be cool."

Jessica worked at the local theater, which wasn't too far from the arcade. Hawkins was a small town, so everything was pretty much within walking distance when you went into the main part of town.

"A'right, let the others know tomorrow and if it's okay with their parents, they can meet us here."

---

The next morning put a hold on their plans. Will Byers hadn't gone home the night before. Joyce Byers, Will's mom, called before Jessica left for school. Her mother answered and when she asked Jessica and Dustin if they'd heard from him, they both shrugged.

"I know he was fine when he went by here," Jessica said, and Dustin nodded.

"Yeah, he got to the end of the street just fine," Dustin added. "Sometimes Will goes in to school early, maybe –"

Their mom told Joyce and, even though Jessica couldn't hear Joyce, she knew that probably didn't help her at all. Will was a good boy. He wouldn't have just left without saying anything, Jessica didn't think.

Dustin didn't seem overly worried at the moment and Jessica was glad. She didn't want her brother worrying over something unless they were certain something had happened. She would know more once she went to school. She went to school with Will's brother,

Jonathan, so if he was there she would get more information.

Dustin usually rode his bike to school, which meant Jessica didn't have to wait around to take him. She had a 1970 Chevelle sitting in her driveway, and it was the reason she had a job. She'd seen it, cherry red, and had fallen in love with it. Her mom had been less than thrilled, but she'd also said if Jessica could find a job and agree to pay a decent down payment on it, she could get it and her mom would help her out.

Hence the job at the theater and picking up extra hours if she could. Most of her weekends were no longer free, but it was worth it if she could one day call that car hers.

"A'right, well, I'm heading out," she said, mussing her hand over Dustin's head of dark curls, so different from her own. Her own hair was a lighter brown, and easier to tame. "See you after school."

She grabbed her stuff, kissed her mom on the cheek, and left.

---

Jessica's plan to find out more from Jonathan didn't go through very well because Jonathan Byers wasn't at school that day. To be fair, Jessica completely understood why. If Dustin had suddenly gone missing, Jessica wouldn't have been worried about school either. School was already barely a blip on her list of priorities that if anything ever happened to her brother she'd probably never go to school again.

The only reason she hadn't yet quit was because she didn't want to be stuck working at the theater her whole life. She hated high school, but she was actually excited about maybe going to college one day.

College, however, had nothing to do with her current situation: Jonathan not being in school, and her not being able to find out more about Will. She wondered if Mike and Lucas had heard about Will yet. She was also relieved that Dustin would be with them at the middle school for the remainder of the school day. If something had happened to Will, at least the other three had a support system they could lean on

During first period – English – Jessica zoned out for a while. She had an A in that class and could afford not to pay attention. It was mostly about research papers and how to cite sources and things like that.

Math was her second class. Her brain was usually fully awake by then. That day, however, she was more or less focused on the fact that Jonathan wasn't there. She didn't share any classes with him because she was a grade above him – she was a Junior – but his locker was right next to his, and he hadn't been there either of the times she'd gone by. She'd never really become friends with him because he was a little stand-offish, but they had said hi to each other in passing. They also sometimes worked the same shift at the theater.

Jonathan not being in school meant that they probably hadn't found Will yet, and Will hadn't just gone into school early like Dustin had suggested. He really was missing. No one else seemed bothered, and it made her realize that no one else knew. Will's disappearance hadn't been made public knowledge yet. He wasn't even officially a missing person because he hadn't been gone a full 24 hours. That was probably the stupidest thing she'd ever heard of because, sure, some kids didn't mind taking off whenever they felt like it, but Will wasn't like that. He was a good kid.

The next two classes flew by and then it was time for lunch. Jessica, not having eaten breakfast, was actually hungry enough to brave a school lunch. A slice of pizza, milk, and an apple.

She sat with a boy named Steve Harrington and two of his friends, Tommy and Carol. She sort of detested Tommy and Carol, and thought they only put up with each other as a couple because no one else would.

Steve, however, was okay. She thought he needed new friends, but she tolerated them because she did like hanging out with Steve. She liked it better when the other two weren't around, but that didn't happen often. Steve cared too much about what others thought about him and tried to appear cooler than he actually was. She hoped he would grow out of that.

He hadn't always been that way. She'd been in middle school when her family had moved to Hawkins, and she had shared a lot of classes

with Steve. He'd been really nice to her – he hadn't had jerk friends then and hadn't cared about appearing cool. That came more with high school and becoming a dumb teenage guy and a jock.

She teased him about it constantly.

Steve nudged her with his shoulder so she looked his way.

"Hm?"

Steve dressed like a rich, white boy, and acted like a rich, white boy. He had smooth, slightly tanned skin, perfect hair, pretty brown eyes, and, at the moment, a concerned expression on his face.

"You should eat," he said.

Even though she was hungry, she'd only been playing with the red apple she'd chosen from the food line. She brought the apple to her lips, but as soon as she opened her mouth a wave of nausea hit her stomach so fast she put the apple back down on the table in front of her.

Tommy and Carol, sitting on the other side of the table, glanced her way curiously.

"What's up with you?" Carol asked.

"Nothing. I'm just feeling sick all of a sudden."

"Probably because you skipped breakfast," Steve said. "You've been walking around with no energy all day."

Steve would notice that. When she was under stress her stomach bothered her. Steve had figured that out as soon as he'd met her. She'd had a lot of stress then – she'd moved away from her home, left her friends behind, had worried about not fitting in at the new school.

She'd never had it so bad that she lost too much weight, and only the people closest to her knew about it, but she did skip a meal or two when she wasn't at her best. A 13-year-old Steve Harrington had taken an interest and had taken her under his wing, so to speak, and

things had gotten better quickly. She remembered his hair had been perfectly coiffed even then.

"Joyce Byers called this morning. Will didn't go home last night. He passed by our house a little after eight and he seemed fine. He was headed home."

"Byers," Tommy interrupted. "You mean that freak's brother?"

"Jonathan," Jessica corrected, "and, yes, his brother. He's only twelve, by the way, since you seem so compassionate about this."

"Hey," Carol snapped. "Watch the tone, Golden Girl. Besides, he's probably just hiding out somewhere. He'll show up when he feels like it."

Will wasn't like that, but Tommy and Carol didn't really know Will. Steve didn't either, but at least he wasn't being a jerk about it.

Steve talked her into drinking her milk and eating half of the slice of pizza she had, and then they walked to the gym together, minus Tommy and Carol.

"How come I'm the only nice friend you have?" Jessica teased.

"You're not the only nice friend I have," he said. "I have Nancy."

Nancy was Mike's older sister. She didn't really know the girl, other than to say hi to, but she knew that Nancy wasn't the type Steve usually went for. She was a good girl, not a partier, and did really well in school. She was a Sophomore, but she'd caught Steve's eye for some reason.

"Nancy is not a friend," Jessica said. "She's someone you're trying to sleep with."

"Hey!" He shoved her gently, playfully. "I resent that."

They stopped walking, and Steve pulled her to the side.

"Nancy is different. She's . . . I mean, we haven't . . . not that I wouldn't if she –"

Steve Harrington was flustered. Wow. But this – exactly this – was why she was friends with Steve. This was who he was when Tommy and Carol weren't around. Kind, caring, not a complete jerk.

"I'm supposed to meet her later so I can help her study."

Jessica grinned. "Study anatomy?"

"No!" Steve exclaimed, pretending to be shocked and offended. "Jeez. Chemistry."

"You failed Chemistry." Though failing didn't mean a D or an F. He was on the basketball team; he couldn't get but so low of a grade or he would be kicked off the team.

"Nancy said the same thing."

"Smart girl." Jessica sighed. "I've gotta get in the locker room. See you in the gym."

---

The gym was set up in a way that allowed there to be four volleyball games going at once. Jessica hated it. It was distracting, and she wasn't in the mood to play anyway. There was always the option of walking around the gym rather than do the actual sport they were supposed to be playing, and that's what Jessica eventually chose to do.

After gym, Steve suggested they hang out – just the two of them – until he had to go be with Nancy, but she declined because she had to work from five to nine that night.

After her last two classes she hurried home so she could shower and change into her black clothes and the red vest all the theater workers had to wear. She tamed her brown curls into soft waves – something Dustin could never do.

By the time she was ready Dustin was home from school. He'd come to her room immediately. He hadn't even dropped his bag off at his room.

"Mike and Lucas aren't allowed to go out until we find out what



happened to Will."

She nodded. "Understandable."

"Chief Hopper came by the school to talk to us."

"Oh yeah?" He sat on her bed and she sat beside him. "Anything new?"

"No. He told us to come straight home after school."

Jessica tried not to show the new tension she was feeling. If Hopper had told them to come straight home, he had to suspect foul play of some kind. Or maybe he was just being cautious. Nothing serious had happened in all the time she had been in Hawkins, and definitely nothing involving anyone going missing. They were probably just all overly worried because this was Will that had disappeared. He was gentle and quiet, and Jessica couldn't imagine what would happen if he was ever in the position where someone was trying to hurt him.

"You okay?" she asked, mussing his hair with her hand.

"Yeah. Just worried about Will."

"Yeah." She shrugged. "I can go check in after work."

"That'd be great." Dustin grinned, most of his front teeth missing, and began digging through his backpack. He came out with a Hershey's bar and a pack of cheese crackers. "In case of emergencies . . ."

Jessica smiled, shook her head, and took what Dustin offered.

"Thanks, Dustie. Love you."

He grimaced. "Never say that in front of my friends."

After a brief pause and one lifted eyebrow from Jessica he rolled his eyes and said it back.

---

Work was slow that night. Being that it was a school night, most kids were at home, and the teenagers preferred late night showings. Plus,

Hopper had decided to call out a search party for Will, and all the willing adults were out looking for him. Her boss had said something about Hopper having found Will's bike abandoned on the side of the road. How anyone knew that, Jessica didn't really know. She just chalked it up to Hawkins being a small town.

No matter how her boss knew about the bike, Jessica knew Will wouldn't have just left it there unless he hadn't had a choice. His mom wasn't that well off and he wouldn't have just thrown his bike away. She wouldn't be able to replace it. Something bad had happened to Will. Something bad had happened not long after Dustin had gotten home.

At that thought Jessica's stomach decided to have a full-scale revolution on her. Her breath quickened as she fought off the nausea she felt just from the thought of something happening to her brother. She also felt a little guilty from being relieved that it hadn't been Dustin who had disappeared. She knew it was perfectly normal for her to feel that way because as much as she loved Will . . . he wasn't her brother. She still felt awful for feeling that way.

She was now more determined than ever to go by the Byers' house after work to get an update and to see how Joyce and Jonathan were. So that was what she did.

She'd never realized how far into the woods the Byers' lived. It was a prime spot for a child – especially one that had been alone like Will had been - to fall prey to a predator.

On the way to the house, she passed by a section of woods that had been cordoned off with crime scene tape. That must've been where Hopper had found Will's bike.

She finally found the dirt trail that led from the road to the Byers' house and travelled down it slowly. She didn't want to hit a deer or anything. She reached the run-down one-story house that was probably considered more a cabin than anything else. Jessica knew Joyce had it hard because she was a single mother of two who had no help from her ex-husband.

Her car looked out of place in the driveway next to the two Fords,

but that didn't matter. She parked close to the porch and hurried up the steps once out of her car. Joyce Byers, a woman in her late thirties or early forties, opened the door before Jessica could even knock.

Joyce's eyes were frantic and her hair was a little frazzled. She was a mom worried about her missing son.

"Jessica?"

"Hey, Ms. Byers. I, uh . . . I came to find out about Will, and –"

"Come in," Joyce said, and ushered her inside the house. "I – don't mind the mess."

"Of course not."

Once inside she noticed Jonathan on the couch, going through pictures of Will. He'd made a HAVE YOU SEEN ME? poster, and was obviously trying to find the right picture to put on it. He glanced her way to acknowledge her presence, but that was it.

"You can sit," Joyce said. "It was sweet of you to check on us. You're the first one aside from Hopper."

Jessica nodded. "I would've come out here sooner, but I was at work. Did they really find his bike?"

"Yes," Jonathan said. "They think he came home last night and was taken from here."

"Oh."

She didn't know what to say about that. If a child couldn't be safe in his or her own house, then where could they be? And if he'd made it home, and his bike had been found in the woods . . . that meant Will had been well enough to run home. Had someone chased him, then? Was there some psycho out there chasing after children? Did she need to be worried about Dustin?

She sat down by Jonathan and began going through the pictures of Will. She was sure Jonathan had taken them himself.

"I can help you put these around town tomorrow, if you want," she offered.

He seemed surprised by the kindness. They'd never really associated with each other – because didn't associate with anyone – so his surprise was understandable. "Why?"

"Because I have a brother too, and I wouldn't know what to do if anything happened to him. I would want all the help I could get. Plus, Will is my favorite of my brother's friends. I'd help for that reason alone."

Jonathan smiled, though it looked more like a grimace, and Joyce clapped a hand over her mouth as tears filled her eyes. Jessica didn't know what to do with that. Her own mother never showed real negative emotion. Should she apologize? Turn away and let Joyce compose herself? Hug her?

"We've made you uncomfortable," Joyce said.

"No, I just . . . did I do something wrong? To cause the tears?"

"It's because you're being nice," Jonathan muttered. "This town and its people . . . you know how they are."

"You mean how a lot of them are jerks? Yeah. Anyway, it's late and I should go, but let me know about the flyers when you get them done."

She stood up to leave and gave both of them a brief hug. Joyce returned it gladly. Jonathan was stiff – almost statue-like – but he hugged her just the same.

---

Not too far from the Byers' house – yet far enough away to be a few minutes walking distance – Jessica came across three bikes, one of which she was very familiar with because it belonged to her brother, parked near the crime scene tape.

"Dustin!" she exclaimed, frustrated, slamming on the brakes. "Seriously?"

It was storming, the rain having started almost immediately after she'd left the Byers' place. She'd been planning on going straight home, but now she couldn't. She had to make sure her brother was okay.

She better not get sick because of this. It was the beginning of November, for crying out loud. Raining, thundering, cold, and she was going to chase after three kids in the middle of the woods where one kid had already been chased from.

She cursed under her breath and got out of the car. She didn't even have a rain coat, so she was going to get soaked. She was actually probably going to get lost. She didn't make a habit of playing in the woods, and she didn't have a flashlight.

This was probably the stupidest thing she'd ever done.

Thankfully it didn't take long to find Dustin, Mike, and Lucas. They'd been yelling at each other. She was proud to find that her brother seemed to be the voice of reason at the moment. He'd been pointing out that they were going in the direction of the place where Will had maybe been taken and that they didn't have a weapon if they came across the person who'd done it.

"Guys!" she yelled, making them all jump. "What're you doing? I thought Hopper said to stay home!"

"About that . . ." Dustin started.

"We're looking for Will," Mike said.

"Obviously." She rolled her eyes. "Next time you guys wanna sneak around you should be craftier about it. You parked the bikes right near the —"

An insane screeching, animal and almost demonic in sound, filled the air.

"What was that?"

The bushes around them began to move with something other than the wind and rain, and Jessica thought they needed to get out of

there as quickly as they could.

"Guys, we're going now."

At least the guys had flashlights, so they'd be able to see to get back to her car and their bikes.

"But Will –" Mike started.

"Isn't here," she said, voice firm. "There were signs at the Byers' house that point to Will making it home last night. He was taken from home, guys. So, *we are leaving*."

The rustling sounds grew closer and Jessica tensed. None of them had anything to fight with, so the only thing they could do was run. They turned to do just that, but their way was blocked by a girl in an overly large yellow Benny's Burgers shirt – Benny's Burgers was probably the best burger place in town. The girl had dark, closely shaven hair, and she was soaked to the skin, shivering – probably freezing – and she appeared frightened.

What was she doing out in the woods dressed like that? And who was she? Jessica knew Benny didn't have a daughter – he wasn't even married, had no other family in Hawkins that Jessica knew of aside from his parents.

The boys had frozen where they stood so Jessica assumed that meant she had to take the lead, which was wrong in her opinion, because even though she was the oldest, she had no clue what to do in this situation.

"Uh, hi," she said, stepping forward only to have the girl step back. "Okay. I'll stay here, and you can stay there. We'll talk just fine this way. What're you doing out here? Are you lost?"

"Not lost," the girl said. She spoke slowly, though, as if speech were new to her.

"Is there a number we can call for your parents?" Mike asked, finally coming back to life. The shock was obviously wearing off now.

"Where's all your hair?" Dustin asked. "Do you have cancer?"

"Dustin!"

"What?"

The shock was wearing off of *all* of them.

"Is that blood?" Lucas asked, stepping forward so that the girl flinched.

Jessica noticed that Lucas was right, though, and there was blood on the girl's shirt.

"Stop it, you're freaking her out," Mike said.

"She's freaking me out."

"She's just scared. And cold."

She did tremble every time the thunder rumbled. Maybe the girl was going through some form of shock as well and the loud noise scared her for some reason.

Mike slid his jacket off of his shoulders and handed it to the girl. Jessica noticed she didn't flinch from Mike, so she slowly backed away and let Mike take the lead there.

"Okay, so . . . what are we doing? We can't leave her here."

They definitely couldn't take her to their house – there was nowhere to put her except for the cellar, and they weren't doing that. They couldn't take her to Lucas's because his parents actually paid attention to what he was doing, and he had a nosy little sister. That left Mike's.

"Mike . . ." she started. "You think we can sneak her in? The basement . . . you know, just for the night until we figure out what to do?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah, not like my parents will notice."

"Great."

Chances were this girl had been abused and had run away – that was

how her personality read anyway – and they were going to have to be careful with her

"A'right, let's get back to the car. Mike, we'll put your bike in the back. You're coming with us. She seems comfortable with you. Okay?"

"Yeah."

"Dustin . . . Lucas . . . Are you guys okay riding your bikes?"

"Sure."

She hadn't forgotten about the screeching earlier, and she was sure that it hadn't come from the girl.

"Stay together at all times, okay?"

"Obviously," Dustin quipped. "We're not stupid."

"Hm. The jury's still out on that one."

---

Okay, as usual, let me know what you think. I have 12 chapters done on this already, so I can probably update once a week. I'm literally stuck on my other stories and started writing this to get my creative juices flowing again



## 2. Chapter 2

### Chapter Two

The hardest part of sneaking the girl into the Wheeler's basement was the amount of time it took to get to the house. Jessica stopped at every street corner to make sure Lucas and her brother appeared in her rearview mirror before continuing on to the next street. They were just lucky they lived in a small town and that almost everyone was already at home and not out on the streets.

Once in the basement, Mike let the girl have some of his clothes. She almost stripped in front of them, as if she had removed her clothes in front of people before and it was no big deal for her, but Mike quickly showed her where the bathroom was. When Mike went to close the door, however, she grabbed it and said, "No."

"You don't want it closed?"

"No."

"Okay, well, how about we leave it like this?"

He left the door open a few inches and she seemed okay with that, so Mike left her there to do her business.

"This is mental," Dustin said. "She tried to get naked."

He mimicked taking his shirt off and knocked his hat off his head in the process

Lucas added, "There's something seriously wrong with her. Like . . . something wrong in the head. I bet she escaped from Pennhurst, the nuthouse in Kerley County. Think about it. That would explain her shaved hair and why she's so crazy. She's an escapee, she's probably psycho."

"Like Michael Myers," Dustin said.

"Exactly. We should've never brought her here."

"So, you just wanted to leave her out in that storm?"

"Yes," Lucas declared. "We went out to find Will, not another problem."

"Hey!" Jessica snapped. "She's not just a problem, okay? She's a girl and she's obviously been through something traumatic or she wouldn't be acting this way. There's nothing we can do until we know more, but we couldn't leave her out there."

She eyed Lucas then especially, but quickly got back to the point.

"Are you sure she can stay here tonight?" she asked Mike.

"Sure. In the morning, she can sneak around the house, go to the front door and ring the doorbell. My mom will answer and know exactly what to do. She'll be sent back to wherever she came from and we'll be totally in the clear."

That was actually a good plan, as long as nothing went wrong.

"A'right, guys, head to the car," Jessica said. "I'll be out in a second. Get Mike's bike out of the car. Dustin –"

"I'm riding home. Gotta make sure Lucas gets to his house."

"Fine. Stay in lighted areas. I'm gonna stay a few minutes, make sure the girl settles in okay."

The two boys left, and the girl finally came out of the bathroom. The shirt and sweatpants Mike had given her were big on her, but at least she'd stay warm.

"We never got your name," Mike said but didn't get a response. Or not a verbal one, anyway.

The girl pushed the sleeve of Mike's shirt up, revealing a number etched onto – into – her skin in black ink: 011.

This girl didn't have a name. She was a number. She was Eleven. And wherever she had come from . . . it hadn't been a mental hospital, and they couldn't send her back.

"I've never seen a kid with a tattoo before," Mike said. "What's it mean? Eleven."

The girl, Eleven, pointed to herself, confirming what Jessica had already known. Dear God, this was Nazi Germany brought to life in Hawkins, Indiana. This girl didn't even know her maiden name; she only knew herself as the number inked into her skin.

"Eleven. Okay."

Mike was processing more quickly than Jessica would have imagined possible for a boy his age, but it made her proud. She could see why he'd become the leader of his group.

"Uh, well, my name's Mike. Short for Michael. Maybe we can call you El. Short for Eleven."

Eleven – or El – had been staring at Mike the whole time he'd been talking. She now nodded in understanding and agreement.

While Mike continued talking to El, Jessica made a place for El to sleep. There was already a fort made of blankets in the corner of the room. A yellow sleeping bag was rolled up beside the blankets, so she placed it inside and rolled it out.

It wasn't a bed, but it was the best they had on such short notice.

Once El was inside, Jessica knelt before her and slowly took El's hand, the one that had the number on it. El didn't try to pull away.

"El, I'm Jessica, or Jess, if you like . . . This – this number . . . You were held somewhere. Right?"

And she was number eleven, which meant there had been others before her and maybe some after her. They might not have escaped. They might still be locked up. Or they might have been killed.

"Are people after you?" El didn't answer. "We can't help you if you don't tell us what's going on."

Jessica looked at Mike and nodded toward El. He knelt down then and spoke.

"You're in trouble, aren't you? Who – who are you in trouble with?"

"Bad," El whispered.

"Bad? Bad people?"

El nodded. Jessica noticed that El didn't seem afraid just then, but her eyes were the saddest Jessica had ever seen on a young girl.

"They wanna hurt you?" Mike asked. "The bad people?"

El brought two fingers up to her temple and mimicked pulling a trigger. It was pretty obvious what *that* meant, but what scared Jessica more was when El turned the two fingers at Mike.

"We're in trouble too," Jessica said, "for helping you. Is that it?"

"Yes."

So they couldn't let anyone know she was there. Mike's plan was out the window. Mike's mom had to be kept in the dark. She would call social services if she found out El was there and then El would be taken back to wherever she'd run away from. That wouldn't end well for anyone.

"Can we keep her hidden here?" Jessica asked. "At least until we can think of something."

It was unrealistic, thinking they could hide El for more than a day or two, but Jessica didn't want to just hand her over to the authorities either, not if they would just end up hurting her – or someone else. So they needed to keep her close, at least until they knew more.

"Mom rarely comes down here," Mike said. "It should be fine for now."

"Good." Then to El, "I don't know if this word means anything to you, but you're safe here."

Back to Mike. "You gonna be okay by yourself?"

"Yeah. Thanks for helping."

"Anytime."

---

Once Jessica got home, the first thing she did was change and take a shower. She smelled like rain and the woods. After that, she tossed her clothes and the blanket from her car in the washing machine. The blanket had really come in handy since two soaked pre-teens had been in her car. The only reason she'd even had a blanket was because she kept one in her trunk for nice nights where she could go somewhere and just lay out and look at the stars. She hadn't been getting much use out of it because it was the beginning of November, but it had definitely been useful that night in covering the girl with only a t-shirt on. And why had that been the only thing she'd been wearing? Had she escaped with only a hospital gown or something?

It was already close to eleven – she would never be able to think of that number again without relating it to the girl they'd found that night.

She probably wouldn't be able to get to bed until after midnight, wouldn't get to sleep until after one. Dustin was already asleep when she checked on him. She was amazed he'd been able to relax so quickly. She was also slightly envious.

Jessica wouldn't have been able to sleep right away anyway. She still had about an hours' worth of homework to do, that she would have been done with already if she hadn't had to stop to make sure her brother and his friends were okay. She couldn't bring herself to be too angry, though, because, even though they hadn't found Will, they had found someone else who'd needed help.

Jessica made herself some hot tea and settled herself at the kitchen table. It was going to be a long day tomorrow.

---

It was a long day. Jessica was out of it by third period. She'd gotten maybe two hours of uninterrupted sleep, the rest of the night filled with dozing and jerking awake whenever the thunder rumbled too loudly and remembering the animal snarling she'd heard in the woods before finding El earlier.

At least she'd been able to eat breakfast that morning, and Steve had met her in the parking lot before school. The Steve part had been nice; the Tommy and Carol part had been less nice.

"What happened to you?" Carol asked, not out of any real concern, but because Jessica usually looked well put together. That day, however, Jessica had just thrown on whatever and put her hair up in a ponytail. She hadn't even tried to tame her curls, so now it was messy and bushy, a few strands loose around her face.

"Don't ask."

She'd moved past them and headed to her locker, where she found that Jonathan wasn't there again. She hadn't expected him to be, but it didn't make her worry any less. It meant that Will still hadn't been found. Statistics showed that the first twenty-four hours were the most crucial in a missing person's case, which was stupid, really, because most cops didn't consider a missing person an actual missing person until after they'd been gone for twenty-four hours. If those hours were the most crucial then why did you have to wait to file a report?

Before fourth period she caught up with Steve and the two jerks. Nancy and Barb were there too. Barb was Nancy's best friend. Jessica had met both of them before – Nancy because of Dustin's friendship with Mike, Barb because of school – and said hi to them in passing when she could. She wouldn't call them her friends, however.

Steve was having a get-together at his house that night because his parents weren't going to be home – surprise, surprise! His parents were almost never home. His dad had a lot of company conventions he had to go to, and his mother went with him because he had straying eyes and hands and other parts of his anatomy that Jessica didn't ever want to think about. The point was that Mr. Harrington had to be kept in check, which meant that Steve was left alone most of the time. He had to find companionship somehow.

Steve invited all of them there in the group.

"It's Tuesday," Nancy stated, making it sound like the most scandalous thing she'd ever heard of, for which Tommy and Carol teased her.

Even Jessica laughed, but she was genuinely amused by the innocence of Nancy's statement. She wasn't being mean.

"It's not such a big deal," Jessica said. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. And if you decide you're not having fun, you can leave."

"Does that mean you're going?" Barb asked.

Jessica shook her head and noticed when Steve's face fell a little. She hated disappointing him, but with everything that was going on she really couldn't afford to go to a party.

"My brother did something stupid last night, and I'm pretty sure he's planning on repeating the idiocy. I can't let him."

"So tell your mom," Steve suggested, doe eyes gently pleading. Really, those things were lethal. "Come."

"Well, I –"

"Oh, look," Carol interrupted.

Because of the tone of her voice, Jessica did look. Jonathan was there, a couple yards away from them, pinning a flyer to the board of announcements the school kept near the office.

"That's depressing," Steve said.

"Should we say something?" Nancy asked.

"I don't think he speaks," Carol quipped.

"How much you wanna bet he killed him?" Tommy said, earning a shove from Steve and an eyeroll from Jessica.

"You're such a jerk. Do you ever think before you speak?"

Jessica basically stormed away toward Jonathan, not really caring what the others thought of her. When she reached him, she was surprised to find that Nancy had followed her over.

Nancy telling Jonathan how much it sucked that Will had gone missing and how sorry she was was probably the most awkward conversation Jessica had ever witnessed, but when Nancy said that Will was a smart kid and he'd be fine because of it, Jessica gave her a small encouraging smile.

Soon the bell rang, and Nancy hurried off while Jessica stayed where she was. Steve's group had no problem leaving Jessica behind. Steve had hesitated for maybe a second before heading to class as well.

"So . . . about the flyers . . . do you need help?"

Jonathan shook his head. "You know your social life is taking a swan dive just because you're talking to me?"

"Oh, who cares? The only reason people even pay attention to me is because of who I hang around."

"I don't think that's true. You'd still be the school's Golden Girl."

"I hate that name."

"Why? I mean, I know why you hate it from Tommy and Carol because they see it as something bad, but the rest of the school uses it because you're so nice. And you're not like the people you hang out with. People respect you here, and it has nothing to do with how many beers you can drink at a time."

Jonathan gave an actual real smile, though he didn't show his teeth, but it only lasted a few seconds.

"Are you sticking around for the rest of the day?" Jessica asked, trying not to show how much Jonathan's words had touched her. She realized then that Jonathan Byers wasn't detached from reality at all; he just chose not to participate in the inane things around him.

"Nah. Hopper said ninety-nine out of a hundred times it has something to do with a parent or relative if a kid goes missing."

"Your dad," she surmised.

"Yeah. Gonna go see him. He's never taken an interest before, but . . ."



"You have to do something or else you'll go crazy?"

"Yeah. See ya."

Jessica watched as he walked away and then went to her next class. She didn't really care that she was late. The teacher didn't either, really, because she didn't make a habit of it.

---

The rest of the school day droned on in its normal boring way aside from the fact that Tommy and Carol kept looking at her as if they had no idea who she was. They acted as if she'd done something wrong by caring about Will Byers and talking to Jonathan. And Steve *let* them treat her that way even if he wasn't actively doing the same.

Having had enough of that kind of behavior Jessica went straight home after school even though she knew Steve would want to talk to her in the parking lot and try to get her to change her mind about the party that night. She might have been tempted if he hadn't been acting like a jerk the second half of the day.

It was good that she had gone straight home because her mother said Mike had called and needed to talk to her.

"When was this?"

"Fifteen minutes ago. He said he wanted you to call him back."

"Right." She assumed Mike had stayed home that day because middle school hadn't been let out yet. "I'll get right on that."

She went to the kitchen, dropped her stuff on the floor, and grabbed the phone receiver off the wall. The only reason she even knew the Wheeler's number was because of Dustin sometimes spending the night over there.

Mike picked up after the third ring. He seemed slightly out of breath, as if the air had been knocked out of him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm great. Remember how you said you'd help anytime?"

"Yeah," she answered hesitantly, hoping her words weren't about to bite her on the butt.

"El pointed to Will in one of my pictures. She . . . she might know what happened to him."

"She didn't say?"

"No, but think about it. We found her on Mirkwood, the same place Will's bike was found. And she said bad people were after her. What if these bad people are the same ones who took Will?"

"You really think she knows?"

"Yeah, just let Dustin know when he gets home. I'll take care of Lucas."

"I'll tell Dustin, but Mike . . . I'm coming with him. I'm part of this."

"Why do you think I called?"

---

Once Dustin got home he and Jessica high-tailed it to Mike's, Dustin insisting on using his bike so he could catch up with Lucas and ride with him.

Everyone congregated in Mike's room as they arrived. Most of the stuff in it was science related, and it made Jessica feel really out of place. Science was not her subject.

Eleven was there, seated Indian-style, on Mike's bed. She had different clothes on than the night before. Dustin was quiet when he saw her, Lucas was very vocal about his dislike of the situation. He wanted to tell Mike's mom.

"No. Eleven made it clear we'd all be in danger if any adults got involved."

"Her name is Eleven?"

"El for short."

"What type of danger?" Dustin asked.

"Danger danger." Mike mimicked a gun with his hand like El had done the night before and pointed it at Dustin's head.

"No. No. No. We're going back to plan A. We're telling your mom."

"Lucas –" Jessica started, but he had already opened the bedroom door.

The door, however, slammed shut seemingly on its own. Lucas tried again with the same result, only this time the door also locked. A few game pieces seated on the shelf beside the door fell over, and everyone stood frozen.

What had just happened? And how? Doors didn't just close on their own, and they definitely couldn't lock on their own.

"No," Eleven said, simply but firmly, still seated on the bed.

They all turned at the sound of her voice. El's nose was bleeding now, the crimson liquid trailing from one nostril down towards her upper lip. El didn't seem concerned about it, but Jessica still reacted by rushing forward and trying to get El to lean her head back. She didn't mean to scare the girl, but she guessed she did because El's eyes widened even as she did as Jessica said.

"It's okay," Mike said. "She's not gonna hurt you."

Eleven's nosebleed didn't last long, and Jessica soon realized she'd overreacted, and remembered what had happened before with the door.

"Did you do that?" she asked El.

If Eleven could do things like that, Jessica was beginning to get a clearer picture of what had happened to her. She had escaped from a lab of some sort, maybe even the lab that was in Hawkins, though Jessica had always believed that lab had been some Department of Energy building for the government. They'd definitely had energy, if they'd been keeping her there.

When El didn't respond to Jessica's question she asked it again, adding. "Remember what I said last night? We can't help you if you don't tell us the truth."

"Yes," El forced out.

"I don't know how much she knows," Mike admitted. "I've been showing her stuff all day – or until Mom got back home, anyway."

Mrs. Wheeler was home and had been since that morning. She'd gone to the store with Holly after Mike had left for school. He'd doubled back once his mother had gone – his father had gone to work before Mike had even woken up that morning. Mrs. Wheeler had walked in as Mike had been showing El around the house and that was why they were both up in Mike's room.

Jessica looked the boys' way. Mike seemed almost unfazed by the way the door had closed by itself, but Lucas seemed a little freaked out. Dustin's face showed amazement.

Jessica felt a natural instinct to try to find a normal, *logical*, reason for the door to slam on its own – like a blast of air from an open window or something. Even though El had confirmed that she'd made the door slam, Jessica couldn't get her head around the concept. Things like this didn't happen outside of books and movies.

"We never would've upset you if we'd known you had super powers," Dustin said, to which Mike punched him in the arm, and Jessica laughed.

She did not find Mike punching her brother amusing, but hysteria was building up inside of her and Jessica had no other way of getting it out other than crying, and she didn't want to do that. So she laughed instead.

"What Dustin is trying to say is that they were just scared," Mike explained.

"We just want to find our friend," Lucas added.

"Friend?" El asked. The confusion and curiosity in her voice broke Jessica's heart. She realized El had probably never had a friend.

"Yeah. Friend," Lucas said. "Will."

"What . . . is friend?"

"Is she serious?" Lucas asked; Dustin shrugged. "Uh, friend –"

"Is someone that you'd do anything for," Mike interrupted.

"You lend them your cool stuff," Dustin added. "Like comic books and trading cards."

"And they never break a promise."

"Especially when there's spit."

"Ew, we're not teaching her that," Jessica exclaimed. "It's gross, and unhygienic."

Lucas, however, had already spit in his hand to demonstrate and was now grabbing Dustin's hand. Dustin looked just as grossed out as Jessica felt, and he quickly wiped his hand off on his pants.

"A spit swear means you can't break your promise. It's your bond," Lucas said.

"And that's important," Mike took over, "because friends . . . they tell each other things. Things that parents don't know."

"Mike said you pointed to Will in a picture," Jessica said. "Do you know him?"

"No."

"Are the people who had you the ones who have him now?"

"No."

"Then how did you recognize him?"

El didn't respond, so Mike tried.

"Did you see him? On Mirkwood?"

"Wait. Where's Mirkwood? You mentioned it earlier, but –"

"The road we were on last night," Dustin said. "We call it that. It's from *The Hobbit*."

"Oh."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Game," El responded.

"Game?" Jessica looked at Mike. "Did you guys play a game?"

"No. The only game she could be talking about is D and D. She saw the board."

"Yes," was El's response.

---

Mike's mom was in the kitchen fixing dinner, so getting El back in the basement wasn't a problem. Once down there, she headed to the gameboard, knocked all the pieces off but one – a wizard-looking thing – and then, holding the piece, turned the board over. She placed the piece down on the dark board.

"Will," she said.

"I don't understand," Jessica said.

"That's Will's piece," Dustin explained.

"Lucky guess."

"Super powers," he argued.

Jessica rolled her eyes and Lucas shook his head.

"Hiding," El said.

"Will is hiding?"

El nodded, and Lucas leaned over the board.

"From the bad men?" But El shook her head, eyes still focusing on the wizard thing. "Then from who?"

El picked up another piece and placed it on the board. This time it was a two headed dragon thing. Jessica had no clue what it was, but she knew it couldn't be good. It just looked evil. She suddenly remembered the horrible screeching she'd heard the night before in the woods.

"Okay, what is that?" she asked once she realized how spooked Dustin looked and how seriously Mike and Lucas were focused on the board.

"It's a demogorgan," Dustin said. "A demon prince."

"A demon prince? Naturally. Is there a way to kill this . . . demogorgan?"

"Well, in the game, yeah, sure," Mike said. "But we just want Will back."

"Do you feel the need to go back out tonight to look for him?"

"I don't think we'll find him. Not if he's hiding."

"Okay, good. You guys call if you change your minds."

"Wait, you're not staying?" Dustin asked.

"I can't. Mom will know something's up if I stay here too long. Right?"

"Right. Okay. You're going home, though, right?"

"Straight home."

She'd contemplated actually going to Steve's get-together, but after the way Tommy and Carol had treated her, and after the way Steve had gone along with it, she'd decided she wasn't going to even bother. She'd felt more included and needed in her brother's group of friends than she had in Steve's life for a while now.

And she hadn't been able to be as open and deep with Steve as she'd been with Jonathan. He'd become . . . a shallow, rich, white boy.

Only . . . she knew he wasn't. He only made himself appear that way in front of Tommy and Carol because he thought it was impressive not to care.

In a way, that was worse. Steve obviously didn't think people would accept him if he let himself be himself. All she knew was that she didn't like who he had become just to appear cool in front of other people.



### 3. Chapter 3

#### Chapter Three

Once Jessica got home she was surprised to find her mom in the kitchen fixing dinner. Her mother hated cooking. She wasn't a bad cook, she just didn't like doing it. Unless it was a holiday or the meal was easy to fix, her mother usually just let them eat whatever they wanted.

That night they were having spaghetti.

"What did Mike want?"

"Something to do with Will. They're all worried something bad has happened. I – I think they feel more comfortable talking to me about it because I'm not actually an adult yet."

"Makes sense."

Jessica noticed that her stuff was still on the kitchen floor, near the phone, where she'd called Mike earlier. That was one thing her mom didn't really enforce – a clean house. Unless they were going to have company, she didn't really care. She figured they would eventually get tired of looking at the mess and would clean it when they decided to.

That hadn't worked when they were younger, but once they'd moved to Hawkins both Dustin and Jessica had matured greatly, so the house stayed pretty clean. That was probably why their mother never got after them about not picking up things all the time.

While dinner was being fixed, Jessica did what homework she had and was done by six. She ate dinner with her mother. Dustin hadn't known their mom was cooking, so he'd stayed at Mike's.

After dinner Jessica, having nothing else to do, watched the news. The only things worth noting were that the search for Will was still ongoing but there were no new leads, and the story of the apparent suicide of the owner of Benny's Burgers.

El had been wearing one of Benny's shirts when they'd found her the night before, and there had been blood on it. Now Jessica knew why. Benny was dead, and he hadn't committed suicide.

The news mentioned that he'd been shot in the head, though they got the part wrong about him having shot himself. Whatever had happened, El had seen it. She'd mimicked the act of shooting, so even if she hadn't known what exactly had been going on, she had known enough to realize how bad it had been.

El had obviously stopped by the restaurant the night before and she'd either been followed or Benny had called someone to let the authorities know she'd shown up there. Benny wouldn't have known who'd had her, where she'd escaped from, and would have called local child services. Unless child services was in on this, people's phone lines were being tapped. Whoever had been holding El prisoner had to be someone high on the food chain to get that kind of help from the . . . government.

Whatever had happened, Benny had been killed for his efforts.

This was just further evidence of why no one else could become involved in this. The more people who knew, the harder it would be to keep El safe and hidden.

Dustin got home safely. Apparently, Mike's parents still hadn't found out about El, which was good for her, but it made Jessica wonder just how oblivious the Wheeler's really were.

"And they're staying put, right?" Jessica asked. "No heroics?"

"Not tonight."

"And tomorrow? I have to work."

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and sometimes weekends.

"What about it?"

"Don't do anything that'll get you killed. Mom and I would miss you. We would cry."

Dustin stood there in her doorway, awkwardly now, because of her words. She knew he already knew he was loved, but because he was a boy he found it weird to be expressed out loud apparently.

"Go to bed, Dustin," she said, suppressing a smile. "Still have school tomorrow."

---

Steve met Jessica the next morning in the school parking lot like he did most days. Tommy and Carol were nowhere in sight, which was weird, but she was not going to complain.

"Hey," he said. At least he had the decency to look guilty. He apparently realized that her hasty exit from school the day before had been because of him.

"Oh, you're being nice to me now?" she almost hissed, grabbing her bag from the back seat and resisting to slam the car door. She wasn't in the habit of mistreating her baby.

"I wasn't being mean to you yesterday."

"No, but Tommy and Carol were, and you let them. You didn't say anything. You didn't do anything."

"Thought you didn't care what they thought."

"I don't care what they think."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem, Steve," she snarled, "is that I *do* care what *you* think. And you obviously don't think much of me at all if you're willing to let them treat me that way."

"What? Come on, you're my best friend."

"Yeah? Well, sometimes you don't act like it." She shoved past him. "I have to get to class."

She still had about ten minutes to spare, but she couldn't stand to look at Steve anymore, not just then. He hadn't understood why she

was mad, he hadn't even understood why she felt he'd been in the wrong. He probably didn't even understand that she was hurt by his inaction, by his not standing up for her.

Maybe he really was just a shallow, rich, white kid – or a shallow, white kid with rich parents. She didn't know if their friendship would last if that was all there was to him. She needed more than just surface emotions. She craved depth, and she just didn't know how deep Steve Harrington was anymore.

---

Jonathan was back in school that day and Jessica kind of wished he wasn't because when she saw him at his locker she had a really hard time not letting him know that her new little group might have a lead on Will. She knew she couldn't because no one could know about El, but she also didn't mention it because . . . what if they were wrong about El knowing where Will was? Jonathan's hopes would be brought up just to be kicked back down if they didn't find him.

No matter how hard she tried to avoid Steve, she couldn't get past him at lunch. He wouldn't let her. He literally stopped her by placing his hand on the door and blocking her way with his arm. Tommy and Carol were there, but Steve told them to go on into the cafeteria. Jessica was surprised, to say the least.

"Nancy is supposed to meet me here in a few, but we need to talk."

"About what?"

"Uh . . . about yesterday, apparently."

"Okay. Listening." She crossed her arms over her chest and waited.

"You're right. I didn't do anything or say anything. I'm sorry. I . . . it obviously upset you that I didn't stop them, so I am sorry for that."

Jessica sighed, releasing some of the anger she'd been feeling towards Steve. She'd really only wanted an apology anyway, so she unclenched her fists and let her arms fall back to her sides.

"You do realize the only reason it upset me is because I will always defend you. I *dare* somebody to look at you funny."

"Oh, Hawkins High, beware," Steve quipped, and grinned as she slapped him on the arm playfully.

"Shut up. I could so take you."

"Sure."

Nancy met them at the cafeteria entrance and they joined the other students in the line. They were having some kind of meat that looked like it was made from gel, mashed potatoes, and some kind of green mushy vegetable, and pudding. The only things Jessica would be attempting to eat were the potatoes and the pudding.

Once seated at the table with Tommy and Carol, Nancy asked if they had seen Barb that day.

"Who?" Tommy asked, stuffing his face with chocolate pudding.

"Barbara."

"I literally have no idea who you're talking about."

"Don't be a jerk about it," Steve said. "Did you see her last night or not?"

"No. She was gone before we left."

Nancy sighed. She'd obviously been hoping for a different answer.

"She probably got tired of listening to all the moaning," Carol teased, and then in a higher pitch, "Oh, Steve. Oh, Steve."

Jessica, who had been bringing a spoonful of potatoes to her mouth but was now frozen, glanced Nancy's way. The brunette was embarrassed, but she seemed to be able to ignore Carol for the most part.

Jessica glared at Carol and gave her leg a light kick under the table to make the girl stop teasing. She did.

As far as Jessica knew, Nancy had never had a boyfriend before, let alone had sex before, and she didn't deserve to be teased for it.

"Guys," Steve said. "Come on."

Steve seemed amused and a little smug, which if Nancy had really reacted the way Carol had said, then he probably was. Jessica sent him a glare too, and he knocked it off when he met her gaze.

"I'm just worried about her," Nancy said. "With everything going on with Will . . ."

"Hey, I'm sure she's fine. She's probably just skipping."

Nancy sort of nodded, but Jessica could tell she didn't believe that. Jessica didn't either. She didn't know Barb very well, but she knew the girl seemed too straight-laced to skip school for any reason other than deadly disease.

If Barb had –

Wait . . . Steve had slept with Nancy. It hit Jessica then – hard – that Steve had slept with Nancy . . . and Nancy was having lunch with them. Steve had slept with many girls and none of them had sit with them at lunch. Steve had said that Nancy was different and maybe she was. Maybe Steve had actual feelings for Nancy.

Jessica thought Nancy was a nice girl, but she still didn't want to lose her friendship with Steve because of her. Maybe she should have another conversation with Steve – only this time she just needed him to know that he wasn't allowed to outgrow her as a friend just because he had a girlfriend now.

---

She didn't get a chance to talk to Steve about anything important that day, however, because Tommy and Carol never left his side unless they were in class, and even after school they all met up in the parking lot. A red-headed girl named Nicole was with them, and they had congregated around Jonathan's car.

"What's this about?" Jessica asked when she reached them.

"It seems Byers' has been sneaking pictures of Nancy behind her back," Steve said, taking a seat on the back of Jonathan's car.

"What? That's . . . How? Are you sure?"

"I saw them with my own eyes," Nicole said. "Today in the dark room. He just developed them."

"Hm . . . and we're waiting around his car why?"

"To tell him to stop, obviously."

Jessica still couldn't believe what was being said. Yes, Jonathan was a keep-to-himself kind of guy, but that didn't mean creep or pervert. It was probably all a misunderstanding.

She continued thinking that even when Jonathan came out and was hassled about his backpack. Tommy had grabbed the bag from Jonathan's shoulder and had then thrown it to Steve.

"Man, he is trembling," Steve said. "He must really have something to hide."

Steve set the bag up on the car and unzipped it, pulling out a stack of pictures.

"Steve, leave them alone," Jessica said. "Just . . . put them back."

"Really?"

"Yes, re –"

Steve turned one around for her to see. The picture showed the group from Steve's house the night before. They were outside near the pool.

"That's not creepy at all," Carol complained, and for once Jessica couldn't blame her or call her a jerk. She was right – it was creepy. Why had he been close enough to Steve's yard to get pictures of the group outside his house?

"I was looking for my brother."

"No, this is called stalking," Steve said.

Jessica's gut clenched uncomfortably and she suddenly felt like she

was going to throw up. She'd been nice to Jonathan, had defended him, and now here she was looking at evidence of why she shouldn't have.

It got worse when Nancy joined the group and realized what was going on. Carol handed Nancy one of the photos from the bottom of the stack. It happened to be a picture of Nancy taking her shirt off in front of the window in Steve's room. Jessica recognized the curtains.

"See, you can tell that he knows it was wrong," Steve said, "but . . . Man, that's the thing about perverts. It's hardwired into 'em. You know, they just can't help themselves."

Jonathan *did* know that it was wrong. He refused to meet anyone's eye – especially Nancy's – and he barely moved when Steve ripped one of the pictures into pieces and tossed them on the ground.

Jessica couldn't even be mad at Steve's actions. His privacy had been intruded upon; Nancy's privacy had been intruded upon, and Steve had every right to be upset – though she did think he was more upset because it was Jonathan who had done it rather than the fact that the pictures had been taken at all.

When Steve grabbed Jonathan's camera from his bag and threatened to drop it, however, Jessica thought he'd taken it too far. Jonathan lunged forward, but Tommy stopped him from getting any further.

"Steve, you've made your point, now give it back."

"Yeah?"

He shrugged and gestured for Tommy to let Jonathan go. He held out the camera for Jonathan to grab, but before he could, Steve let the camera fall to the ground, where it smashed to pieces.

Tommy and Carol laughed. Nicole seemed shocked. Nancy just stared at the broken pieces, and Jessica shook her head as Steve began systematically tearing all the pictures to shreds. She couldn't believe what Steve had done; he'd never actually taken a turn at vandalism before.

Once done, Steve said, "Come on, the game's about to start."



There was a basketball game being held that evening in the gymnasium. Jessica cared nothing about sports at all, and she only went to the games because Steve was on the team. She had to work that day, so she couldn't have gone anyway, but even if she hadn't been she wouldn't have gone. Not after what Steve had done.

She realized then that she hadn't moved from her spot in the parking lot, but neither had Nancy. In fact, Nancy was staring at the pile from a picture that had been taken of Barb sitting poolside with her feet in the water. Nancy knelt to pick up the pieces and then took off after Steve.

Jonathan quickly picked up the pieces of his broken camera without looking at Jessica. Despite what she'd found out, she still felt a little bad for the guy.

"I'm sorry about the camera," she said. "Really. I thought . . . I don't know what I thought, but I know I didn't think he'd do that. And you should have never taken those pictures. It is stalker-ish."

"I know."

That was all he said before he got in his car. It didn't take much longer for her to make it to her own car. Then she was on her way home.

---

Once home, Jessica went through her normal work day routine of showering and changing into work clothes. She put her hair up in a ponytail, as she had the day before, only this time she didn't leave it messy. The only thing different about that day was the fact that Dustin hadn't made it home by the time she was ready to leave for work.

She assumed that meant Dustin was with Mike and Lucas. She hoped he was, anyway. No matter where he was, she still had to go to work.

"Kay, Mom. I'm out."

Her mother didn't work, not really. She did arts and crafts and sold them, but the settlement from Jessica's dad's life insurance policy had

set them up pretty well. The only reason Jessica was working was to teach her a little about responsibility.

The short ride to work was uneventful, spent listening to rock music, until she pulled in front of the theater and parked. Once inside the building she noticed that one of the drink machines was on the fritz. Soda was going everywhere.

Apparently, none of the buttons were working to shut the machine off. Two people were working behind the counter; one of them eventually unplugged the machine.

"What happened there?" she asked.

Bill, the manager and one of the two behind the counter at the moment, shrugged.

"The thing just started going nuts. The news people have been talking about power surges – maybe that's the problem. I don't know."

Jessica clocked in and went back out to where the tickets were sold. She was glad she didn't have to work behind the counter that day; the mess was not her problem. She only really had to work behind the counter on the weekends, the two days the theater was busiest.

She had a few people come through, mostly couples, but that was it. She got bored easily, though, on slow days, and she wasn't allowed to do homework while working. Sometimes all she did was sit there.

It could get monotonous and she felt great relief when her shift was over and she could go home. The difference that night was that once she clocked out and got to her car Steve pulled up beside her in his dad's BMW and rolled his window down. At least his parents left him a way to get around when they were gone.

He was by himself. No Tommy and Carol. No Nancy.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey. What're you doing here?"

He shrugged. "Thought you might like to hang out."

After what had happened that day in the school parking lot she wasn't sure she wanted to hang out with anyone at the moment.

"Where's Nancy?"

"She didn't go to the game either. She said she had something to do with her mom."

"Oh."

"You don't think I freaked her out, do you?"

"Freaked her out? Doing what?"

"This afternoon."

"By being a jerk? I don't know. You did smash the camera."

Steve got out of the car and made his way in front of Jessica.

"He deserved that."

"No. He didn't." Jessica sighed. "What Jonathan did wasn't right, and you *were* right by taking the pictures away, but you only smashed the camera to impress Tommy and Carol. It's so important to you what they think of you that you're willing to be a bully for them."

"I'm not a bully."

"No, you're not. But you are when you're with them because that's what they are."

Jessica felt tears fill her eyes and she ducked her head to hide them. She accepted a hug from him, though, when he wrapped his arms around her. It eased the need to cry, but it also helped the tears that were already there to fall. That was it. No more tears after that.

"You . . . if you had found out by yourself, you wouldn't have done that. You would've talked to him and maybe taken the pictures from him, but you wouldn't have broken the camera. That's vandalism, Steve, destruction of property."

"I know. I know . . . I've upset you again."

"Yeah."

She stepped away and took a deep breath.

"It's not just you, though, Steve. Will's missing, and Dustin went out the night he found out Will had disappeared looking for him. I think he went out again today, and I hope he's with Mike and Lucas, but I couldn't go looking for him because I had to work."

And now Barb was missing too, and Jessica was helping Mike harbor someone that was probably on the run from the government. If El hadn't been a kid, Jessica probably wouldn't have been helping her, to be completely honest, and she couldn't tell Steve any of that.

But no, it wasn't all Steve's fault that her nerves were on edge. It wasn't even Steve at all, really, because she knew how he was, and she'd never complained before – though she had felt she could plenty of times – but with everything else going on she'd been standing on a ledge and Steve was the closest thing to take her frustration out on. He was also the safest.

"For what it's worth . . . your brother's bike was in the driveway of your house. I saw it on my way here."

Relief filled her and her body releasing its tension was an almost physical thing. It was so immediate and strong that she felt as if she could just sink to the sidewalk where she was standing. Her brother was home and safe.

"Did you eat dinner before you left for work?" he asked. "We could go get some food, hang out for a bit."

That sounded so good, just her and Steve hanging out. It was what she needed.

## 4. Chapter 4

### Chapter Four

Steve and Jessica ended up at a diner that was known more for its milkshakes than its food. Still Steve ordered a large plate of fries for them to share, and they both ordered a shake – Steve a strawberry one, Jessica a chocolate one. She liked to dip the fries in the shake, to which Steve turned up his nose.

"What? It's great!"

"It's disgusting."

"It's delicious. What're you talkin' about?"

Steve shook his head, his perfect brown hair moving with the motion. He was glad Jessica had decided to come out with him that night. There had been tension between them for the past few days and he didn't like it. He understood that she was worried about the Byers' kid – not the perverted one, but the missing one – but he didn't want that to hurt their friendship.

He didn't want any of the stuff that had happened to hurt their friendship. She had learned to ignore Tommy and Carol over the years, but he knew she had never learned to accept their behavior. And Steve had never even realized how much he had become like them; it had been a gradual process, so smooth it hadn't felt like a real change at all.

"You really think I'm a bully?"

Jessica looked down at the table before shrugging and looking back at him.

"I stand by what I said earlier. You can be when you're with Tommy and Carol."

"Hm. But me and you, we're good, though, right?"

Jessica grinned slyly. "I've been going back and forth."

"Hey!"

He threw a fry at her, no ketchup – which was good because it landed in her wavy hair. She looked shocked for about two seconds, and then she began laughing.

"I can't believe you did that! What, are you twelve?"

"It made you laugh."

Steve would never admit it out loud, but he lived for moments when Jessica laughed. She was always so serious that when she really let go and had fun it was beautiful. *She* was beautiful.

He maybe liked his best friend a little and had for a while, but she'd never acted as if she was interested in being anything other than friends, and there was no way he was going to mess it up by asking her if she'd like to give it a try.

No. It was better to have her as a friend than not to have her at all. And he did like Nancy. It wasn't like he was playing her. She was nice and beautiful. She needed to learn to loosen up a little, but Steve did care about her. And he couldn't stay stuck on a girl who didn't want him the way he wanted her.

---

Jessica and Steve left the diner around ten, Jessica feeling better than she had when she'd gotten off work.

"Thanks, Steve. I think I really needed this."

"Like I said, you're my best friend."

They had driven their own cars. Jessica stopped Steve before he got into his.

"Steve, I . . . This probably sounds stupid, but . . . I don't have to worry about Nancy, right?"

"What?"

"Nancy. You . . . really like her. I mean, you like hanging out with her

outside of the bedroom. The other girls . . . they wanted to have fun and you wanted to have fun, and that's all it was, but you care about Nancy, right?"

"Yeah," he said hesitantly. "What's this about?"

"Well, now that you actually have a girlfriend, you're not gonna forget about me. Right?"

"What?" Steve asked again, only this time he seemed incredulous.

He wrapped her in a hug again, only this time he rocked her back and forth playfully, and she had to lean from side-to-side to go with it.

"How many times do you have to hear me call you my best friend?"

"One more time," she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

He held her slightly away from him and held her gaze with his. His eyes were a pretty doe brown – and he had killer puppy dog eyes, which wasn't fair – and they were one of the things she loved about him.

"You, Jessica Henderson, are my best friend."

He was being sincere, and it made her hug him again, this one brief but heartfelt.

"Thanks again, Steve. I'll see you tomorrow in school."

"Yeah. Parking lot like always."

---

Jessica drove home thinking about Steve's hugs. They were always nice. Soft, sweet, and short when she needed them to be, or tight and comforting when she felt she needed to be held together. And she had definitely not been holding it together well.

Aside from the affection she shared with Dustin from time to time, she didn't really receive touches from anyone other than Steve. Her mother was verbally affectionate, but physically was another story

altogether. She rarely hugged either of her children, so to say Jessica craved human contact wouldn't have been wrong. Steve craved affection too, from spending so much time alone.

As soon as she walked into her house that night she knew something was off. Dustin was still up and in the living room – and he was crying. He almost never cried; he tried to stay positive. Something had to have happened.

Dustin ran to her the moment he saw her and threw his arms around her. She returned the gesture, holding on tightly because she had no clue what to do or what was wrong. She looked at their mom, who also had tears in her eyes.

"Mom?"

"They found Will earlier tonight," she said. "In the quarry."

Dustin held on tighter. It made Jessica's chest tighten. She could tell that wasn't the whole story. Dustin wouldn't have been crying if they had found Will . . . alive.

"Mom . . ."

"It was on the news. They think the ground gave way and he fell in."

He had crashed his bike that night. Maybe Will had been wounded or disoriented and . . . Maybe Hopper had been wrong about the signs of Will arriving home that night before disappearing.

"Dustin . . . I'm sorry."

She ran her hand through his hair and squeezed tighter with the arm that was still around him.

"I told him he didn't have to go to school tomorrow if he didn't want to."

"Good idea," Jessica said. "Come on, Dustin."

She led her brother upstairs and to his room. He sat on his bed, tears falling silently. Jessica sat beside him, placed an arm over his



shoulders.

"What happened?" she asked him, to which he shrugged. "Were you here when you found out?"

He shook his head. "We were at the quarry."

"What? What on earth were you doing there?"

"El."

"El led you there?"

"No. I . . . After school we picked El up, and she led us to Will's house. I don't know how she knew it was his house, but she did."

"Super powers," she reminded him, earning a very tiny quirk of his lips.

"Right. Anyway, a bunch of cop cars flew by, sirens blaring, and we followed them. They ended up at the quarry."

Dustin must've seen Will's body being dragged out. He'd probably fought tears all the way back home, and it was quite a ways away from their house to the quarry.

"I wish I could have been there with you guys. You shouldn't have been out there anyway, but I get why you were, so I wish I could have been there for you."

After a few seconds Dustin admitted that he would have liked her to have been there too.

---

Jessica stayed with Dustin until he fell asleep – a little after midnight – and then she went back down to the living room. Her mother had already gone to bed. Jessica assumed her mother had figured Jessica would take care of it, take care of Dustin.

Well, she had done the best she knew how to, and now she wanted to relax. She put *The Outsiders* in the VCR and laid on the couch. She had no intention of falling asleep, not for a while. If Dustin wasn't

going to school in the morning, she wasn't either. There was no way she was leaving him alone with their mom. She'd have no clue how to deal with an emotional Dustin.

So, no, she had no intention of going to school or going to sleep. She passed out, however, right before Pony Boy and Johnny decided to be heroes for the kids in the burning church. She woke up to sunshine glaring in her face, and to Dustin shaking her awake.

"Oh, what? What?"

She smacked his hand away and grunted when she realized how stiff her body was. Where was she? In what God-awful position had she gone to sleep in? And why was her neck hurting so badly?

"Jess! Lucas is waiting outside."

"So?"

"So we have to go."

"Why?"

"Will!"

Jessica's dark blue eyes snapped open and she sprang up fast enough to almost collide foreheads with her brother, but he was quick enough to back away. She realized then that she was on the couch – *that* was why her body was hurting so badly.

"What about Will?"

"I don't know. Mike told Lucas to come over and get me. We're heading over there. Do you wanna come?"

She assumed that meant neither Mike nor Lucas were going to school that day either – maybe they were skipping without permission.

"Yeah. Tell Lucas he doesn't have to wait outside. I'm gonna go change right quick."

"I . . . if it's okay, I'm gonna head over on my bike. That way you

don't have to stick around all day if you don't want to."

"Okay."

Jessica noticed that her brother didn't seem as sad and withdrawn as he had the night before. He'd had time to process and, even though she could tell he was still more than sad, he wasn't close to tears anymore.

"Hey, leave Mom a note before you leave."

Dustin agreed, and Jessica forced herself off of the couch. Once upstairs, she checked herself in the mirror. She was still in her work clothes from the night before. That hadn't helped the comfort levels while she'd been sleeping either.

Wow, she looked a mess. Her usually beautiful vanilla caramel skin was a shade lighter than normal. It didn't make her appear unhealthy, it was just unusual for her. Her hair was all kinky curls like Dustin's. The usual waves had tangled overnight, but since she didn't have to go to school she wasn't going to worry about fixing it. She brushed it and put it up into a messy bun. She decided on a deep red sweater and blue jeans with sneakers.

She took an old beaten up leather jacket with her for later. Who knew when she would get back?

If this was about Will, she had no idea what she would be needed for other than emotional support. Mike probably wouldn't have much support in the way of his parents or Nancy – she'd never really appeared close to Mike, and she now had her own friend to worry about.

Mike probably just didn't want to be alone, and she didn't blame him. His parents' lives couldn't stop because Will had died. His mom still had to be a mom to Mike's sisters – Holly was Mike's younger sister; she barely knew how to talk yet – or if she did, she played it close to the vest.

Lucas had pretty okay parents from what Jessica knew of them. He also had a pretty awesome but annoying little sister, who probably

wouldn't be much help because of her age.

The point was Jessica would be there for them because they had lost a friend. They had lost a friend that Jessica had cared about too.

---

While Jessica was getting ready to go meet Dustin at the Wheeler's house, Steve was outside the school near the exit of the gym talking to Nancy. Apparently, while Nancy was supposed to have been doing something with her mom during the game the day before, she'd actually been sneaking around his yard and the woods around it looking for Barb. He didn't know why she just hadn't come to him. He would've searched with her.

She'd seen some creature . . . thing. It was probably just some guy in a mask, but, according to Nancy, it was definitely not a human.

"But he had no face?"

"I don't know! I don't know. I just have a terrible feeling about this."

Steve was sure Nancy was blowing everything out of proportion. She was probably overly worried because of the news about Will. This was different, though, because Barb wasn't twelve years old. She was probably – and then it hit him. Nancy was going to tell the police about Barb disappearing. She had found Barb's car parked where it had been the night of the party, so he understood why, but still . . .

"Oh, this is bad. This is really bad."

Steve leaned against the brick wall as his mind started going crazy on him. Little known fact: Steve Harrington felt anxiety too, and the fact that Barb had disappeared from a party he'd held at his house was going to drive him insane. His parents hadn't known he was going to throw it, but they wouldn't have cared. They didn't much care about anything as long as Steve didn't get in trouble.

"The cops. They're gonna wanna talk to all of us now."

"So?"

"My parents are gonna murder me!"

Nancy crossed her arms over the pink shirt she had on and glared at him.

"Are you serious right now?"

"You don't understand. My dad is a grade-A asshole."

It was true enough that Steve's dad had never left a bruise on him, but that didn't mean his dad had never laid a hand on him in anger.

"Barb is missing, and you're worried about your dad?"

That was right. Nancy didn't know because she'd never met his parents. She didn't understand what would happen if the Harrington name ended up involved in a missing person's case.

"Okay . . . Just, when you talk to the cops . . . just," he pushed off the wall – "don't mention the beer."

Nancy's glare intensified. It reminded Steve of the day before when Jessica had been scolding him for breaking the pervert's camera.

"It's just gonna get us both into trouble and Barbara's got nothing to do with it, okay?"

"I can't believe you right now." She shook her head and began to walk away. "I can't believe you."

"Nancy."

She kept walking.

"Nancy, wait."

He didn't follow her when she didn't stop going forward. What was the point? It wouldn't change anything. He still thought they were all going to get in trouble, and he still wasn't going to be able to change her mind.

And he was still disappointing the people he cared most about.

---

When Jessica arrived at the Wheeler's her suspicions were confirmed: Neither of Mike's parents were home. Holly was probably either with her mom or at a babysitter's, and Nancy was probably at school.

The guys were in the basement, seated in front of the little fort El had used as a bed the night they had found her. She was inside the fort, playing with the walkie talkie, or radio communicator, whatever it was called. All she knew was that they each had one, and they were long-range, and it helped when they wanted to communicate when they were apart.

El was going through the channels, and every now and then the sound of a scared little boy came through – though it was more whimpering than anything else. Mike was sure it was Will. He'd first heard it the night before after getting home from the quarry.

"We keep losing the signal, but you heard it, right?"

"Yeah, I heard a baby," Lucas said. "Mike, you probably tapped into a baby monitor. It's probably the Blackburn's next door."

"Uh, did that sound like a baby to you? That was Will."

"Mike –"

"Lucas, you don't understand. He spoke last night. Words. He was singing that weird song he loves. Even El heard him."

"Oh, well, if the weirdo heard him, then I guess –"

"Are you sure you're on the right channel?" Dustin interrupted before an argument could break out.

"I don't think it's about that. I think, somehow, *she's* channeling *him*," Mike said.

"Like . . . like Professor X."

"Exactly."

"Are you actually believing this crap?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know," Dustin said. "Do you remember when Will fell off his bike and broke his finger? He sounded a lot like that."

Jessica saw the hope in Dustin's eyes and wanted so badly to feel it too. She didn't want Will to be dead – of course she didn't – but . . . there was no way Will could be communicating with them if he was dead. What was happening was that Mike *wanted* it to be Will so badly that he was making himself believe he was hearing him through the walkie talkie. They were hearing someone, but it wasn't Will. It couldn't be.

"Did you guys not see what I saw?" Lucas asked. "They pulled Will's body out of the water. He's dead!"

The last part was yelled, and Dustin looked down, hope dying in his eyes.

"Well, maybe it's his ghost. Maybe he's haunting us."

"It's not his ghost," Mike countered.

"How do you know that?"

"I just do!"

"Then what was in that water?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Will is alive. Will is alive!" Mike calmed down slightly. "He's out there somewhere. All we have to do is find him."

The whole time Mike and Lucas had been yelling at each other, El had continued messing with the dial of the walkie talkie. Her eyes widened a few times when their voices had gotten louder, but other than that she'd shown no sign of distress. It reminded Jessica that they had no idea of what had happened to El before them finding her, but it had not been good.

"This isn't gonna work," Mike said. "We need to get El to a stronger radio."

"Mr. Clark's Heathkit ham shack."

"The Heathkit's at school. There's no way we're getting the weirdo in there without anyone noticing," Lucas said.

"You know, she has a name," Jessica said. "Wouldn't kill you to use it."

Though El definitely wouldn't fit in at all. Girls had longer hair and didn't wear sweats to school. Plus, El didn't relate well to people. It wasn't her fault, none of it, but to pull this off she couldn't be allowed to stand out.

"We can borrow some of Nancy's clothes. Put on some makeup . . ."  
Mike suggested and looked at Jessica. "Help anytime, right?"

"Right." Jessica grinned. "I'm beginning to regret those words."

Her tone was light so Mike would know she was teasing, and he grinned back.

Mike led them up to Nancy's room, and Jessica told the guys to wait outside the door. She was going to find out what drawer held Nancy's underwear and she was going to guard it with her life. She felt bad enough she was going to steal some of Nancy's clothes, the least she could do was keep Nancy's dignity intact.

"Okay, guys. You can come in."

Mike seemed to at least know where Nancy kept her makeup.

El sat on the bed Indian-style, and Mike sat in front of her, a container of blush in one hand and the brush in the other. El moved away from him as soon as the brush touched her face. Mike shrugged and grinned as if he didn't understand why girls bothered with makeup either.

Mike applied the blush, just a very light amount. They didn't want El looking like a clown.

Jessica picked a nude glow type of lip gloss because Mike had gone for the ruby red kind. El was twelve, not sixteen.

Lucas found a pink dress that Jessica thought was hideous, but it had



the frills most girls seemed to want to wear and the skirt was twirly. Dustin found a blond wig - this had been in a box of old things that had been lying around in the basement. That was going to be the hardest part because El had no hair to clip it to.

Once it came to El having to actually change, the guys left the room and Jessica closed the door so they couldn't peek – not that she thought they would; they were good kids.

She noticed that El couldn't take her eyes away from the door. Jessica remembered El didn't like enclosed spaces.

"It's okay," Jessica said. "It's not locked, and there's a window."

Jessica laid the pink dress out flat on Nancy's bed and looked at El.

"I think you're very brave to do all this," Jessica said. "And you're strong too, because you survived."

El looked at her and slowly walked to her. Years of mistreatment had taught her to be cautious in her movements. Jessica hoped she would learn not to be afraid around them.

When El was in front of her, she touched Jessica's hair and said, "Pretty."

Jessica's throat suddenly felt tight and clogged. She knew then that El probably thought she was ugly for all the same reasons Jessica had thought El wouldn't fit in.

Jessica tipped El's chin up so she could catch her gaze – her eyes were such a pretty light brown.

"You're pretty too. You don't need the gunk on your face or the blond hair. Okay?"

Jessica helped El into the dress, which probably would've fit Nancy perfectly with the skirt ending above the knee but came down to about mid-calf on El. She wondered what they were going to do for shoes for El.

El had a watch around her wrist, which Jessica knew belonged to

Mike, so she left it there even though it clashed with the dress. Mike had given it to El for a reason.

"Okay. Let's try the wig now. This may be tricky."

The wig *was* tricky, and in the end all Jessica could do was make sure the wig stayed in place as long as El didn't move too fast.

When the guys saw her, Lucas seemed appeased that El would at least fit in, and Dustin's jaw dropped open.

"Wow, she looks –"

"Pretty," Mike said. Then realizing what he'd said, he added, "Good. Pretty good."

Jessica grinned but hid it by ducking her head. It seemed Mike Wheeler was definitely sweet on El. She was sure this was his first crush. Mike was a nice kid, though. El would be fine. Mike cared about her already, and there was some weird connection between them that Jessica didn't really understand but approved of anyway.

El made her way down the hallway and stopped in front of a mirror and looked at herself for a few seconds. A small smile graced her lips and she looked at Mike.

"Pretty. Good."

It almost sounded as if El were going to cry, but she kept her composure well enough. Jessica just hoped El would remember that she didn't need the getup to be pretty.

"A'right, so . . . This is where I get off, I think," Jessica said. "I can't go to school with you."

The guys nodded. They'd already known that.

"I'll try to fix Nancy's room to how it was so she won't know we were in there."

"Good idea," Mike said. "Thanks."

"Help anytime, right?" she said.

"Right." Mike smiled – a genuine full one, the kind that could sometimes lead to laughter.

As the four kids made their way downstairs Jessica heard Mike say, "Your sister is kinda cool."

"Yeah, she can be," Dustin said.

Jessica shook her head and grinned. She knew she wasn't supposed to have heard that, but she had and she appreciated the words anyway.

---

It wasn't long after the kids left that Mrs. Wheeler and Nancy pulled up outside their house. Jessica's cherry red Chevelle was parked on the road there. Nancy wondered why she was there.

Nancy and her mother had been silent during the drive home from the school. It was barely eleven yet, but her mom had been called to the school so the police could talk to Nancy. A parent had needed to be present for some stupid reason, and now her mom knew everything. It didn't matter, really, but she'd wanted her private life to stay private.

"You lied to the police," her mother said.

"I didn't lie."

"Nancy, how naïve do you think I am?" her mom shouted. "You and Steve just talked?"

*That* was what her mom was worried about? Barb was missing and the only thing her mom could focus on was her relationship with Steve.

"We slept together!" Nancy screamed back. "Is that what you wanna hear? But it doesn't matter. None of that matters!"

"It matters."

"No. Barb is missing! None of that has anything to do with her.

Something terrible has happened. I know it. I . . . know it, and nobody is listening to me!"

She'd explained about going to Steve's house the day before. She'd explained what she'd seen – the creature or whatever it had been – and that after that she'd found Barb's car abandoned on the side of the road, parked where Nancy had wanted to the night of the party.

The cops hadn't found anything where the car should've been, and they hadn't found anything in the woods behind Steve's house either.

Maybe she hadn't seen anything in Steve's yard – maybe she had scared herself into seeing that creature, but she had *not* hallucinated the car. No way. Someone had to have moved it, stolen it maybe.

The cops thought maybe Barb had come back, taken the car, and run away, but Barb wasn't like that, and Barb had been happy at home. She would have had no reason to leave.

Nancy got out of the car and slammed the door shut. If her mom wasn't going to believe a word she said, then she just wanted to be left alone.

---

Jessica didn't know anyone was in the house until Nancy came stomping up the stairs. Luckily Jessica had put everything back where she thought everything had been and was now in Mike's bedroom. She'd rushed in there when she'd realized Nancy was home.

She'd hoped – had thought – she'd be able to get out before anyone got back. By all rights, she should've been able to have been gone, but something must have happened.

Nancy stopped at the doorway of Mike's room. She seemed upset and confused.

"Why are you here when no one else is – and in my brother's room?"

Nancy had every right to ask her that.

"Uh, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin were here and they were all upset about Will. Dustin wanted me here and Mike said it was okay, so . . ."

"Hm. Where are they now? Mike was supposed to have –"

"He changed his mind. They all left for school about twenty minutes ago."

Nancy's eyebrows rose, questioning, and she just stared. It made Jessica feel a little uncomfortable. Nancy didn't have to say anything. Her point had been made: Jessica had no reason to be there. No one had been home; she should have left once Mike had.

"I, uh . . . I don't know why I stayed. I just . . . didn't wanna go home and have to ignore what happened to Will just to please my mom."

No matter what Mike had said about hearing Will the night before, Jessica couldn't let herself believe that. Things like that didn't happen. She had gone along with it because she'd been able to tell Mike had believed it, and Dustin too, a little. She wouldn't have been able to convince them of anything else. They needed to find out that Will was really gone on their own.

"You can . . . you can stay. I don't want to be alone with my mom either."

The offer had been unexpected, seeing as to how the two girls weren't really friends, but Jessica accepted anyway. Even though she had only used it as an excuse, she really didn't want to go home to be with her mother.

Nancy turned and began walking to her bedroom. Jessica followed. Nancy tossed her bookbag on the bed and sat down.

"So . . . did school let out early or something?"

"No, I . . . the cops came to the school. They had questions about Barb."

"Oh."

She assumed that meant the police knew about the party Steve had held at his house.

"Something happened to her. I know it. She wouldn't just leave."

"I believe you." At Nancy's shocked gaze, Jessica continued. "I didn't know Barb personally, but I do know she cared about school and doing the right thing. So, you're right. She wouldn't just leave."

Nancy's eyes misted over and she busied herself with unpacking her bag. The first thing that came out was a stack of ripped up pieces of paper; the shredded picture from the day before.

"You can sit down," Nancy said.

Jessica sat beside Nancy and was able to see part of the picture that showed Barb at the edge of the swimming pool in Steve's backyard. Nancy laid that piece down and the next one. The one after that, however, was of the woods, and . . . there was something standing at the edge of them. It looked like an alien, and its head was shaped like a – well, Jessica didn't know what it was shaped like, but it definitely wasn't human. The best way to describe it was that it looked like a larger-than-life rose bud had been placed on the top of a human-shaped body.

It looked like it should've been a monster from one of Dustin's horror movies that he loved so much.

"Nancy . . ."

"I see it." She stood up. "Hold on. I'm gonna go get some tape."

Nancy headed out of the room. Her footsteps reached the stairs and Jessica heard her go down. There was a brief conversation between Nancy and Mrs. Wheeler. Jessica couldn't hear all of it, but she did hear when Nancy explained that Mike had decided to go to school after all.

Mrs. Wheeler had probably thought Jessica had been there because Mike and the others were there. Now that she knew otherwise, she would probably have questions . . . Questions that Jessica couldn't truthfully answer.

Jessica distracted herself by putting the pieces of the picture together just so Nancy wouldn't have to worry about it. She could just tape them and be done with it.

That's what Nancy did. Once the picture was put together, it was pretty obvious that, whatever the creature, was it had been going after Barb.

"I knew it," Nancy whispered. "That's the thing that I saw."

"Wait, you've seen this?"

"At Steve's. I – I went back yesterday to –"

"I get it," Jessica interrupted. "Barb's your friend."

"Right."

A comfortable silence fell between them until Jessica thought of someone who might be able to help them.

"Hey, uh . . . Jonathan took this picture. Maybe he saw something."

Nancy seemed to hesitate, and Jessica realized Nancy might not want to talk to Jonathan. He *had* taken pictures of her that he never should have.

"I'll talk to him if –"

"No, I . . . it bothered Steve more than it bothered me. I was just thinking about Will. Jonathan probably doesn't want to be bothered."

"True. But Will was missing and now . . ." Jessica sighed. "I think he'd help if he could. He might have seen something and didn't say anything because he thought it was too weird or that he just imagined it."

If she had seen whatever that thing was in real life, she wouldn't have told anyone. She wouldn't have believed her own eyes, so why would anyone else?

"Does . . . Steve know about this? I mean, if it's been in his yard, he could be in danger."

"I told him. He didn't believe me. I mean, he believed I saw something, but he thought I'd freaked myself out. And then he

freaked out when I mentioned talking to the cops."

"His parents?" Nancy nodded. "His dad's a jerk. The only time he pays attention to Steve is when he does something his dad doesn't approve of."

"Anyway, let's go find Jonathan."

---

Nancy hadn't seen Jonathan at school, so both girls thought it was a good idea to head to his house. Maybe they would be lucky and catch him there. They had tried calling, but the call hadn't gone through. Supposedly the number was out of service.

Now Jessica and Nancy were in Jessica's car on the way to the Byers' residence. They weren't talking, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. There was no pressure to fill the silence around Nancy. Jessica didn't know if that was because she didn't know Nancy very well or if it was just because Nancy was a calming presence in general, but it was nice.

Once they reached Jonathan's house they both got out of the car and went up the porch steps to the front door. Jessica had noticed that Jonathan's car wasn't in the driveway, so he probably wasn't home, but maybe his mom could tell them where to find him.

They knocked and Joyce Byers opened the door almost immediately. She seemed confused as to why they were there. She also didn't seem as upset as she should have been seeing as to how one of her children had been found dead the night before.

"Hi, Ms. Byers," Jessica said. "Uh . . . we were hoping to talk to Jonathan."

"Oh?"

Jessica saw the living room and had to refrain from reacting. The room – meaning the walls and ceiling – were covered with Christmas lights, and the alphabet had been painted on the wall opposite the door.

What exactly had Joyce been doing?



"He's – he's not here. He's probably at the funeral home."

Then why wasn't she with him? She was Will's mother, so why was Jonathan taking care of this? It wasn't his job.

"Thank you, Ms. Byers," Nancy said politely. "We'll, uh, catch up with him later."

And catch up with him they did. He ended up being at the funeral home like Joyce had said he would be, and they interrupted him in the middle of picking out a coffin.

*Will*, Jessica thought.

They shouldn't have been there, they shouldn't have been bothering Jonathan with this, not today of all days. But he talked to them without hesitation. He seemed to welcome the distraction.

Nancy showed him the picture and he actually listened to her without judging or treating her as if she were crazy.

"It looks like it could be an image distortion, but I didn't use the wide angle." His voice was soft and low, almost as if he were being respectful of the place they were in. "I don't know. It's weird."

He handed the picture back to Nancy.

"And you're sure you didn't see anyone else out there?"

"No. She was there one second and then . . . gone. I figured she bolted."

"The cops think that she ran away." Nancy shook her head. "But they don't know Barb. I went back to Steve's, and I . . . thought I saw something. Some weird man or –" Nancy sighed. "I don't know what it was."

"What'd he look like?" Jonathan asked. "This man you saw in the woods. What'd he look like?"

"I – I dunno. It was almost like he – he didn't have –"

"Didn't have a face?" Jonathan interrupted.

Nancy stared. "How did you know that?"

Jonathan didn't seem to want to answer, which Jessica found weird because he'd seemed so accepting about things.

"Jonathan . . . have you seen it?" Jessica asked.

"No . . . but my mom said she saw something like this. A man with no face."

Jonathan shrugged. "I might be able to focus the picture for you, but I'd have to use the dark room at the school."

"Well, I have nothing else to do," Jessica said. "Sad to say."

Nancy huffed one brief laugh. "Same."

"I have to finish ups here, but . . . after?"

They all agreed to meet at the high school. Jessica didn't know what was going on, but, apparently, talking to dead people and trying to discover monsters was a thing in her life now.

Nothing good could come from this.

---

Because Jessica hadn't eaten breakfast, she stopped at the diner she and Steve had gone to the night before and ordered a hamburger and soda to go. She offered to get Nancy something, but she said no.

She waited until she parked in the school parking lot before eating her food. The burger was a little greasy for her tastes, but she was actually hungry so she wasn't going to complain.

She sat in silence with Nancy, music in the background, while she ate. It occurred to Jessica that despite her brother being friends with Mike she knew next to nothing about the girl, and Nancy knew next to nothing about her. The only reason they were having anything to do with each other was because some very weird stuff was going on.

By the time Jessica was done with her food, Jonathan had arrived. Jessica tossed the bag her burger had come in – and the wrapper that had been around it – on the floorboard in the back. She'd find a place to throw it away later.

On the way inside the school Nancy asked Jonathan if his mom had seen anything else, like maybe where the thing with no face had gone, but Jonathan said no.

"She said it came out of the wall."

Jessica almost stopped walking. Things were coming out of walls now? Naturally. Why not? Mike thought he was talking to his dead friend using radio waves; a girl named Eleven could move things with her mind; Nancy was seeing this creature with no face, so . . . Why couldn't things come through walls?

"What are we going to do?" Jessica asked. "With the picture?"

"Brighten and enlarge it," Jonathan answered. "It's why we need the dark room."

"How long does it take?" Nancy asked.

"Not long."

"Have you been . . . doing this a while?"

"What?"

"Photography."

"Yeah. Well, I mean . . . I guess I'd rather observe people than, you know . . ."

"Talk to them?" Nancy finished for him.

"I know it's weird."

"No," she said quickly, sounding sincere and obviously not wanting to offend him.

"No, it is. It's just sometimes people don't say what they're really thinking, but you capture the right moment . . . it says more."

"What was I saying?" Nancy teased. "When you took my picture."

Jonathan dipped his head, not in embarrassment but in guilt.

"I shouldn't have taken that." He looked at Nancy. "I'm, uh . . . I'm sorry."

Nancy accepted his apology. She had never really seemed as bothered about it as Steve had been, and if she was able to tease him about it, she'd obviously gotten past it already. Plus, Jonathan was helping them.

Once in the dark room, lit with a deep red light on the wall to the left, Jonathan was true to his word. It didn't take long. He did some technical stuff for a few minutes and then the developing picture was put in some kind of clear chemical liquid, where it floated for a few seconds before an image began to appear.

"That's it. That's what I saw," Nancy said, pointing to the picture.

What was there on this picture was a bigger version of the alien-looking rosebud-human hybrid thing they had seen in the picture of Barb with her feet in the pool in Steve's backyard. Jonathan switched the focus of the picture from Barb to the creature.

"My mom," he said. "I thought she was crazy. She said, that the body they found wasn't Will's and that he's still alive. If this thing exists and it took Will, and he's still alive . . ."

"Barbara."

Jessica shook her head. "Are we thinking this . . . *thing* took Barbara and Will, and that it came from the walls?"

"Maybe not the walls," Jonathan admitted. "But this thing came from somewhere."

"Nobody will believe us," Nancy said. "Which means we have to do something about it."

Jessica didn't know if she liked that plan, but if the adults weren't going to do anything, she guessed Nancy was right and they would have to.

"Well, Will's funeral is at noon tomorrow," Jonathan said. "Maybe we could meet up after and make a plan – or at least think of ways to keep this from happening again."

Nancy agreed, and Jessica did too, reluctantly.

"I'll see if I can switch shifts with somebody at work so I can have tomorrow off."

Everyone knew that Dustin was friends with Will and that, through that friendship, Jessica had grown to care for Will. Hopefully that would be enough to make her boss generous enough to switch her shift.

---

Okay, so I know in the show Mike says that the radio communicators only work if you're within a short-range distance, but they worked fine when they were in the bus and Hopper and the others were at the Byer's house, so they can't be but so short-range. That's why I changed it in here.

## 5. Chapter 5

### Chapter Five

After making a plan to meet up again the next day with Jonathan, Jessica took Nancy back to the Wheeler house. Once there, Jessica noticed her brother's bike propped up against the side of the house, near the garage.

At least he was safe. It was nearly dark now, and she was glad he'd made it back safely.

"Mind if I come in for a minute? Talk to my brother?"

Nancy shrugged. "Sure. They're probably in the basement."

Lucas's bike was there too – and Mike's, obviously. And the guys were in the basement. They were seated around the table they usually played Dungeons and Dragons around. They had the game book out in front of them, and Dustin was reading from it.

El was there also, laid out on the couch. She seemed even more withdrawn than normal. Jessica went to sit beside her as the guys acknowledged her presence.

"So, did it work?" she asked. "Did you get to . . . communicate with Will."

"The radio kept going in and out," Lucas said.

"But he did say he was somewhere like home. Like maybe his house," Mike said.

"Or maybe like Hawkins."

"Upside Down," El said.

"What?" Jessica asked.

"Upside Down," Mike said. "When El showed us where Will was, she flipped the game board over, remember? Upside Down. Dark.

Empty."

Jessica remembered that El had placed Will's wizard piece on the board and that she'd also placed the weird demogorgan piece on the board with him. Did that mean the demogorgan had Will, that Will was with whatever it was, that he was still alive and that whatever had been taken out of the quarry really wasn't Will's body? Had Mike really heard him the night before?

"El took us to Will's house to find him," Mike explained. "We couldn't find him, but what if it was because he's on the other side?"

"The other side being . . . an alternate dimension?" Jessica guessed.

"Like the Vale of Shadows," Dustin said.

"And that is . . ."

"A dimension that is a dark reflection or an echo of our world. It is a place of decay and death," Dustin read from the game book. "A place of monsters. It is right next to you and you don't even see it."

"An alternate dimension," Jessica reiterated.

"But how do we get there?" Lucas asked.

"You cast Shadow Walk."

"In real life, dummy."

"We can't Shadow Walk, but . . ." Dustin looked at El. "Maybe she can."

Everyone looked at El, who was still in the pink dress from earlier.

"Do you know how we get there?" Mike asked. "To the Upside Down?"

All El did was shake her head. Jessica thought she appeared lost in thought, and maybe also a little tired. Going new places and being around people may have worn her out.

Jessica patted the young girl's leg gently. "Are you okay?"

"Okay," she said.

After about a minute of silence Jessica stood up.

"I'm going to go now. Be careful riding home, Dustin. And, uh . . . Will's funeral is tomorrow at noon. We still have to go even if . . . ya know."

The guys nodded and then Jessica made her way up the stairs. She didn't see Nancy anywhere, but Mrs. Wheeler was in the kitchen, and Mr. Wheeler was in front of the TV in the living room.

Only Mrs. Wheeler responded when Jessica told them goodbye.

---

The first thing Jessica saw when she pulled onto her street was that the car Steve drove was in her driveway. She wondered why he was there and why he had decided to stay when he'd found out she hadn't been home.

Then again, she hadn't been at school that day aside from the time it had taken to develop that picture in the dark room, and she hadn't been home for him to call, so . . . maybe he just needed to talk.

Inside, Steve and her mom were seated in the living room. The TV was on and neither was talking, but it wasn't an awkward silence. Steve had been over too many times for them to be uncomfortable around each other. Steve still seemed relieved to see her, however, and stood up when she walked in.

Steve seemed as well put together as he normally did, but there was an anxiousness in his eyes that she saw only because she knew him so well. She wasn't sure Nancy would have been able to tell something was wrong.

"Hey," she said, letting her surprise over him being there show in her voice.

"Hey."



"What's up?"

Steve glanced at her mom and then back at her. "Can we talk?"

"Sure. Come on."

Steve had been in Jessica's room many times, and as long as the door stayed open her mother didn't care.

"So . . ."

"You weren't in school," he said.

"Yeah. 'Cause of Will."

"I figured. You okay?"

She nodded. "I'm – I'm good."

She wanted to tell Steve about what she'd been doing all day, but she knew she couldn't. One: it would put him in very literal danger if he knew of anything of what she'd been doing. Two: he would never believe her without seeing everything himself.

"Are *you* okay?" she asked. "Did I miss something today?"

"The cops called my parents. They're coming home early."

"Why did they –"

"They need to talk to me and since I'm not eighteen yet a parent has to be present."

Jessica knew what that meant. The party Steve had held was going to get him in trouble – not because there had been drinking, and not because a girl had gone missing from his backyard, but because it was going to inconvenience his dad.

That was what had caused the anxiety she'd seen in his eyes. Steve wasn't afraid of his dad, not really, but he still wasn't Steve's favorite person. As far as Jessica knew, Mr. Harrington had never hit Steve, though Steve may have been pushed a few times or grabbed too

roughly.

Mr. Harrington had other ways to make Steve feel bad about himself: Desiring and expecting nothing less than perfection while also telling Steve he would never be enough. It really picked up when Steve let his dad know he didn't want to go to college only to follow in his footsteps. Steve did not want to work for his dad at the real estate company.

They sat on the bed then, side-by-side, and Jessica grabbed his hand. Steve was a very affectionate person, and he responded to physical touch best when it came to comfort.

"Well, you know our couch is always there if it gets too bad."

Steve nodded and squeezed her hand gratefully.

"So, when will they be home?"

"Tomorrow. They'll take me to the station, so I'm not going to school."

"Me either. I . . . Will's funeral and all."

"Right." Steve withdrew his hand from hers. "Did you want me there?"

"Are you kidding? After what happened between you and Jonathan, I don't think so."

"Well, I wouldn't be there for him. I'd be there for you."

She smiled, and her heart felt warmer inside her chest. The truth was that if she believed Will was actually dead, she would have very much wanted Steve with her at the funeral no matter what Jonathan thought, but since she now thought Will was just in another dimension – no matter how crazy and unrealistic that was – she just wanted the funeral over with.

"Thank you," she said. "I love you, and you're my best friend, but I'll be okay. I'll be there for Dustin, and then he'll probably want to go to Mike's or something. I'll call you after and see how everything went for you."

"Okay."

She laid her head against his shoulder then, and they just continued talking for a few minutes.

Steve left about an hour later seeming much more at ease. Jessica hoped he stayed that way, and that his dad didn't come down too hard on him.

---

The next morning Jessica got up at ten, ate a half a bowl of cereal, and then got dressed in a knee-length black cotton dress. Her shoes of choice were black flats. She didn't wear makeup, but she did tame her hair into waves rather than unruly curls.

After she was done fixing herself up, she went to Dustin's room to see if he needed help. He was good aside from the bowtie. She was tempted to tell him he was on his own on that one, but, being the good sister that she was, she tried anyway. It turned out okay – not perfect, but okay.

Their mother was already downstairs waiting for them. Her eyes were misty, but she was holding it together pretty well.

The drive to the cemetery was quiet. Jessica didn't know what to say. What if she gave away the fact that she wasn't grieving the way she should've been?

When they pulled into the cemetery and parked in the designated area, they saw that about thirty people in all were there. Mike, Lucas, and their respective families were already there; Jonathan was standing with his mom and some guy Jessica assumed was his dad. Nancy was in the back of the crowd, which was where Jessica headed. Dustin went to the front, where Mike and Lucas were, and that was the last Jessica saw of him until the funeral was over.

The service itself was simple but heart-wrenching. The minister talked about people probably questioning how a loving God could take someone as young as Will. He hadn't had the chance to live yet. It was a good question, and it made many people cry, which made Jessica want to cry. She could be completely fine, but if she saw tears

in someone else's eyes, or if she saw someone in pain, the dam would open up and she would cry right along with that person.

It was not a good thing when one was at a funeral, where almost everyone cried.

Once the service was over, Nancy and Jessica met up with Jonathan a little ways away – everyone else was giving out condolences and asking if Joyce needed anything, so they had plenty of time.

Jonathan had somehow gotten his hands on a small map of the town and had marked the places he knew for sure the creature had been: Steve's house, Jonathan's house, the woods where they found Will's bike.

"It's all so close," Nancy said.

"Yeah. Exactly," Jonathan agreed. "Whatever this thing is, it's all within a mile or so. It's not travelling far."

"It's probably somewhere in the middle," Jessica suggested. The marks Jonathan had made would have formed a triangle if he'd connected them. "Is there anything in the middle?"

"Woods . . ."

"You wanna go out there?"

"We might not find anything."

"I found something," Nancy reminded them. "And if we do . . . see it, then what?"

Jonathan sighed. "We kill it."

"Uh . . . how?" Jessica asked. "We don't even know what this thing is."

"My dad has a gun in the car, in the glove compartment. He carries it all the time. Ammo and everything," Jonathan said.

"Are you serious?" Nancy asked, voice raised.

"What? What, you want to take another photo of this thing, if we see it again? Yell at it?"

"This is a terrible idea."

"Yeah, well, it's the best we've got. I mean, you can tell someone, but they're not gonna believe you. You know that."

"Your mom would."

"She's been through enough."

"She deserves to know."

"Yeah, and I'll tell her when this thing is dead."

"She'll feel better once she knows she's not alone," Jessica said. "That someone believes her."

"She'll feel better once I have proof that this thing exists."

"Uh, the picture . . ."

"Pictures can be doctored. Anyway, I've gotta get back to my mom, but we should meet later on."

---

There was a small church on the same land where the funeral had been held. Inside the church, in the fellowship hall, a small group of friends and family were getting together for food and drinks.

Joyce Byers was off by herself at a table in the corner when Jessica, Jonathan, and Nancy walked in. Jonathan went to be with her, and Jessica took off in search of her brother. She found him, along with Mike and Lucas, at a table with Mr. Clarke, their science teacher. The only reason Jessica knew him was because she'd had him for science as well when she'd been in middle school.

The three boys were asking about alternate dimensions. Luckily, Mr. Clarke loved science and all that went along with it and didn't mind talking about it. He even thought that theoretically there were parallel universes.

"They're like our world," Mr. Clarke said. "There are infinite variations of it. Which means that there's a world out there where none of this tragic stuff ever happened."

"Yeah, that's not what we're talking about," Lucas said.

"We were thinking more of an evil dimension," Dustin said. "Like the Vale of Shadows."

Luckily, Mr. Clarke was also into Dungeons and Dragons. He already knew what the Vale of Shadows was.

"If a place like that did exist, how would we travel there?"

"Theoretically."

"Well . . . picture an acrobat," Mr. Clarke said. He grabbed a pen from his shirt pocket, clicked it, grabbed a clean paper plate, and drew a line across it. "It's standing on a tight rope."

Mr. Clarke drew another line across the plate right underneath the first one. He used a stick figure to represent the acrobat.

"The tight rope is our dimension, and our dimension has rules. You can move forwards or backwards."

Jessica watched as Mr. Clarke drew an arrow on either side of the stick figure acrobat, and then as he marked the top line with what looked like a big period with antenna.

"But what if right next to the acrobat was a flea. Now, the flea can also travel back and forth. Just like the acrobat, right? But here's where things get really interesting."

Mr. Clarke drew arrows between the two lines.

"The flea can also travel on the side of the rope. He can even go underneath the rope."

"Upside down," the boys said in unison.

"Exactly."

"But . . . we're not the flea," Mike said. "We're the acrobat."

"In this metaphor, yes, we're the acrobat."

"So we can't go upside down?"

"No."

"Well, is there any way for the acrobat to get to the Upside Down?" Dustin asked.

"Well, you'd have to create a massive amount of energy. More than humans are currently capable of creating, mind you, to open up some kind of tear in time and space, and then . . ." Mr. Clarke folded his paper plate so it would be flat, and then forced his pen through it. "You create a doorway."

"Like a gate?"

"Sure, like a gate. But again, this is all theoretical."

"But . . . but what if this gate already existed?" Mike asked.

"Well, if it did, I – I think we'd know. It would disrupt gravity, the magnetic field, our environment. Heck, it might even swallow us up whole. Science is neat, but I'm afraid it's not very forgiving."

Jessica hated science, and this was exactly why. She now had more questions than she'd had before hearing all Mr. Clarke had said. She still respected him, though, no matter what subject he was teaching. He wasn't one of those condescending teachers that looked down on his or her students. He actually enjoyed teaching and cared about the kids. He loved when people took an interest in what he was teaching.

And he liked talking to his students; he tried to answer questions to the best of his ability and didn't try to talk down to the kids.

All in all, he was a pretty great teacher.

---

Once the funeral was over, everyone went back to their respective houses. Once Jessica reached hers she called the theater, spoke to her

boss, and easily got the night off. She'd never asked for time off before, which was probably why Bill had said yes.

Both Jessica and Dustin changed clothes, and then Dustin left on his bike to go to the Wheeler's. She would soon follow after in her car. That was quickly becoming a routine for them.

She tried calling Steve because she'd promised she would, and she really did want to know what had happened with him and his parents. She didn't get an answer, though, and decided she would try again at the Wheeler's.

Once at the Wheeler's, Jessica found the boys talking to El down in the basement. She suddenly felt a tad bit guilty for keeping the girl locked up down there. It was almost as if El had traded one prison for another. Then again, people were after her. She couldn't really go cruising around town. The basement was the safest place.

She was surprised they had gotten away with this for so long, to be honest.

Mike was explaining the gateway to El, who must have decided she liked the pink dress and the wig because she was still wearing them.

"What we want to know is, do you know where the gate is?" Lucas asked. When El shook her head, Lucas exclaimed, "Then how do you know about the Upside Down?"

El looked down at her hands on her lap and didn't answer. She and Mike were on the couch, while Lucas was on the chair opposite them. Dustin was off in the corner holding something in his hand and spinning around as if he didn't know which way to go.

"Dustin, what're you doing?" she asked him.

"I need to see your compasses."

"What?" Mike asked.

"All of your compasses. Right now."

It turned out that the boys had about eight compasses altogether.



They spread them out over the gameboard on the table.

"Dustin?" Jessica questioned. "What're you doing?"

"The compasses . . . They're all facing North, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, that's not true north," Dustin said.

"What d'you mean?" Mike asked.

"I mean exactly what I just said. That's not true north."

Everyone just stared at him.

"Are you guys seriously this dense? The sun rises in the east and it sets in the west, right?" He'd pointed in the directions as he'd said them. Now he pointed another way. "Which means that's true north, right?"

"So, what you're saying is the compasses are broken."

Dustin looked as if he feared for Mike's intelligence.

"Do you even understand how a compass works? Do you see a battery pack on this? No, you don't, because it doesn't need one. The needle's naturally drawn to the Earth's magnetic North Pole."

"So, what's wrong with them?"

"Well, that's what I couldn't figure out, but then I remembered you can change the direction of the compass with a magnet. If there's the presence of a more powerful magnetic field, the needle deflects to that power. And then I remembered what Mr. Clarke said. The gate would have so much power –"

"It would disrupt the electromagnetic field," Mike interrupted.

Lucas followed their logic. "Meaning if we follow the compasses north . . ."

"They should lead us to the gate."

El had been silent throughout the conversation, which wasn't anything new, really, but she also seemed frightened. Jessica couldn't really blame her; they were basically talking about a rip in the universe, a hole that could lead to another, less pleasant, world, and El's world was already not a good one.

The boys made plans to follow the compasses to find where the supposed gateway was, and to enter it when they found it. El was going to go with them, of course, which made Jessica feel a little bit better because she couldn't go herself.

She had a demogorgan to find. She had been hesitant when hearing about Jonathan's plan, and she still thought it was crazy, but she had a brother to protect. A brother and his friends, who were brave enough to go after Will to try and bring him back.

This thing had already taken Will. There was no way she was letting it near her brother.

---

The guys seemed a little disappointed when they found out Jessica wasn't going with them, but they understood once she explained why. She told them the truth. She had to. She didn't want them thinking she was ditching them now, now that they were going to actually have a chance at finding Will.

"I haven't seen this thing other than in a picture, but Nancy did. It's going between this world and the Upside Down. If you do find this gateway, don't go in. Not alone. Mark it down, and we'll all go in together to get him."

The fact that there was an actual, physical monster that could take them away from their world – or kill them – didn't deter them in any way, which Jessica could understand, because of Will, but it did make her wonder if they were taking the monster seriously.

She left the boys to it. They had to pack a few things – mostly snacks and water.

She found Nancy outside in the garage, a baseball bat in hand, Steve there leaning against the car. There was a distance between them,

physical and metaphorical. They both looked her way when she went into the garage.

"Hey," she said. "I tried calling you, but I didn't get an answer."

"I was probably at the station," he admitted.

"Did you get in trouble with your parents?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah, of course, but it's whatever. Have you heard anything about Barbara? Have her parents?"

Nancy shook her head, and Jessica watched as Steve's expression softened.

"I'm sorry about yesterday. I panicked and I was a real dick."

"Yeah, you were," Nancy agreed.

Things were silent for a few seconds and, when it seemed that Nancy wasn't going to give an inch, Steve pushed away from the car. He was going to leave.

Jessica motioned to Nancy that she would be back and followed Steve out of the garage. The BMW was parked at the side of the road in front of the house.

"Hey, are you really okay?" she asked once they reached his car.

He shrugged. "Dad's angry, but yeah. Just another notch on the list of things I've screwed up."

Jessica hated that he felt that way, but he had been making mistakes left and right lately. Still, making mistakes was only human, and it didn't make him a bad person.

"You know, most parents would be angry if they found out their kid had a party at their house while they were gone, especially when said kid didn't have permission."

She said this gently, in a non-confrontational way. She knew Steve's dad wasn't angry about the party; he was angry that the Harrington

name was now caught up in a scandal. Steve's parents hadn't known Barb, and probably didn't care that she was missing and probably dead. They did care about the fact that she had last been seen at their house.

"Are you grounded?"

"Not really. Got a stern talking to. They'll be gone again by tonight."

She touched his arm, smiled sympathetically, and said, "I, uh . . . I have things to do tonight with Dustin because of the funeral and all, but . . . tomorrow night I can meet you at your house. We can hang out. Just you and me."

"Sure. The other night at the diner was fun. I've missed that. The just you and me thing."

She grinned. "Not my fault. You're the one that likes to hang out with jerks."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Never gonna let me live that down, are you?"

"Not as long as you're still hanging out with them."

To be fair to Steve, he hadn't chosen Tommy and Carol; they had chosen him, had clung to him because of his parents' money and his last name. He'd just never gotten away from them – they were considered the cool kids, partiers, and it had helped Steve build an image he'd wanted. He was now realizing that image didn't really matter to him.

---

After Steve left, Jessica spent the next thirty minutes teaching Nancy how to swing the bat correctly. She didn't know who had taught Nancy to hold the bat, but she'd been gripping it halfway down its length so that when she swung there was no power behind it at all.

About an hour after that, Nancy and Jessica met Jonathan out in a field near the woods where Will's bike had been found.

Jonathan had made a pseudo shooting range – he was trying to shoot some cans off of some logs. Trying being the operative word. If they

were going to rely on Jonathan to protect them, they might want to think about getting him a different weapon, because he wasn't hitting anything.

"Isn't the point to hit the cans?" Nancy asked.

Her weapon of choice was a baseball bat, the one from the garage, while Jessica's weapon was a crowbar, which was still in the trunk of her car. It wasn't like they were going after the creature right at that moment.

"No, see the spaces between the cans? I'm aiming for those. You ever shot a gun before?"

Nancy scoffed, dropping a brown bag she'd brought with her – flashlights and things like that were in there.

"Have you met my parents?"

Jessica had never shot a gun either. She'd never wanted to, but even if she had . . . her mother hated guns.

"I haven't shot one since I was ten," Jonathan said. "My dad took me hunting on my birthday. He made me kill a rabbit."

"A rabbit?"

"Yeah. I guess he thought it would make me into more of a man or something. I cried for a week."

Jessica could see that. Jonathan was quiet and gentle, she didn't want to picture him killing anything that didn't deserve it.

"I'm a fan of Thumper." He shrugged. "He and my mom loved each other at some point, but . . . I wasn't around for that part."

Jessica didn't know Jonathan's dad. She'd moved to Hawkins after Joyce had split up with him, after he had already moved to Indianapolis. From what Jonathan had just said, she was glad she didn't know his dad.

Jonathan reloaded the gun, and Nancy asked if she could try. He

handed her the gun and Nancy fiddled with it, getting the feel for it.

"I don't think my parents ever loved each other," she admitted.

"Must've married for some reason."

"My mom was young." Nancy brought the gun up. "My dad was older, but he had a cushy job, money. He came from a good family. So, they bought a nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac and started their nuclear family."

"Screw that," Jonathan said.

"Yeah. Screw that," Nancy agreed.

She stuck her tongue out in concentration, aimed at one of the cans, and pulled the trigger. She hit the target on the first try.

"Whoa," Jessica said. "I think we've found our gun slinger."

Nancy and Jonathan seemed to agree, and they all started back to their cars, Nancy grabbing her bag and putting it back on her shoulders before heading off.

On the way, Jessica thought about what Nancy had said about her parents and wondered if Nancy knew that she was headed in the same direction. She wasn't saying Nancy didn't care about Steve, but the pattern was the same. He was older than Nancy, his parents had money, and he would have a cushy job if he did what his dad wanted and went into the real estate business. And they probably would have a house at the end of a cul-de-sac if they ever got married and had kids.

"You never said what I was saying," Nancy said. "Yesterday, you said I was saying something, and that's why you took my picture."

"Oh, uh, I don't know. I guess . . . I saw this girl, you know, tryin' to be someone else. But at that moment, you were alone, or you thought you were, and, ya know, you could just be yourself."

Nancy didn't seem to like that answer at all. She even turned to face Jonathan, to confront him.

"I am not trying to be someone else. Just because I'm dating Steve and you don't like him –"

"You know what? Forget it. I just thought it was a good picture."

"He's actually a good guy."

"Okay."

"Yesterday, with the camera . . . he's not like that at all. He was just being protective."

"That's one word for it."

"Oh, and I guess what you did was okay?"

"No. I – I never said that."

"He had every right to be angry."

"Okay. All right. Does that mean I have to like him?"

"No."

"Listen, don't take it personally, okay? I don't like most people. He's in the vast majority."

Jonathan began walking away. Jessica was glad. Not for the first time, she'd begun to feel that she didn't exist when she was with Nancy and Jonathan, but . . . Nancy began talking again.

"You know, I was actually starting to think that you were okay. I was thinking, 'Jonathan Byers, maybe he's not the pretentious creep that everyone thinks he is'."

"Yeah, well, I was starting to think you were okay. I was thinking, 'Nancy Wheeler, she's not just another suburban girl who thinks she's rebelling by doing exactly what every other suburban girl does. Until that phase passes and they marry some boring one-time jock, who now works sales, and they live out a perfectly boring little life at the end of a cul-de-sac. Exactly like their parents, who they thought were so depressing, but now? They get it'."

It was almost dark now, and the three teens were near the cars. Jessica heard what sounded like a whimper, and she stopped in her tracks. Nancy seemed to have heard it too. Jonathan only stopped because they did.

"What is that?"

They followed the sound for a few minutes until they came across a wounded deer. The poor thing had either been hit by a car or attacked by something. There was blood on its neck and belly, and it was just lying there barely moving at all.

"We can't just leave it," Nancy said.

She brought the gun up but, even knowing the deer was suffering, she couldn't bring herself to shoot it. Jonathan took the gun from her and took a deep breath. Jessica began to turn away because she didn't want to see any of what was going to happen, but . . .

Jonathan didn't have to shoot. Something pulled the deer away. She didn't see what it had been, but whatever it was had to be strong to pull the deer. It had to have been fast too, for it to have moved without being seen . . . Unless whatever it was had powers like El.

Nancy pulled a flashlight from her bag, and passed it to Jonathan, pulled another one out, passed it to Jessica. The last one she saved for herself.

"Where'd it go?" Nancy asked.

"I dunno."

There was no sign of the deer, but there was a clear blood trail. Jessica began to have serious doubts about trying to find this thing, whatever it was. If it could do this . . . what chance did they have, and she didn't even have her weapon.

They followed the blood trail to the end and then they just looked around. No deer, no anything. The trail just stopped. Maybe the thing had hopped dimensions or something.

Nancy was the first to notice where the deer may have been dragged



off to. There was a hole in a nearby tree, but it didn't belong in the tree. It was big enough for the deer to have gone through, and it was damp, liquid drip-dropping everywhere.

"Jonathan?" Nancy called out, but he'd already begun looking in another direction.

Nancy shook her bag off her shoulders and leaned forward, as if she were planning to go in. If this was what Jessica thought it was – a way into the Upside Down – they couldn't just go in. Neither one of them had a weapon. Nancy hadn't gotten the gun back from Jonathan once he'd taken it to shoot the deer.

"What're you doing?" Jessica asked, grabbing her shoulder. "You can't go in there, not by yourself."

"So come with me," Nancy said.

"We really should wait for Jonathan. He has the gun."

Nancy shook her head and dropped to her knees. She began crawling forward. Jessica also dropped to her knees to follow Nancy even though she thought this was probably the stupidest thing she'd ever done. Why had she ever thought this was a good idea? Going after some creature that had kidnapped two people and maybe killed one of them? Yeah, really smart idea.

The two girls ended up crawling through what appeared to be really slimy spiderwebs, only the material was thicker, denser. It reminded Jessica of the cocoons she'd seen in movies about people being abducted by aliens only to wake up in a spaceship laboratory.

"I think I'm gonna throw up," she said.

They eventually came out of the tunnel and stood up. The tunnel had taken longer to get out of than it should have if they'd only had to crawl the circumference of the tree trunk, and now they were in some other place – a dead, dark place. Some kind of ashy substance was floating in the air, and they probably should not have been breathing it in.

"Nancy, let's go back. This is not right. We should not be here."

"Barb –"

"Is probably dead! Now let's go."

Jessica even turned to go back. If Nancy wanted to stay and get killed, that was her prerogative. But as she turned she noticed that the opening they had come through was closing, and it was now too small for them to get through.

"Nancy . . . if we get stuck here, I'm letting that thing eat you."

"What?"

"Look."

Jessica pointed at the even smaller opening and felt a small amount of satisfaction as fear crossed Nancy's face. Maybe the girl was finally seeing the seriousness of the situation. They could die there, wherever they were.

They seemed to still be in the forest, just not the one they had been in a few minutes before. They were in the Upside Down. Jessica was sure of it, and maybe they were stuck there. Like Will was stuck . . . Maybe they could find Will while they were there.

"I think we're still in Hawkins," she said. "Just on a different level of existence. We're still in the woods, just . . . not ours."

"We should look for another way out."

"Yeah. Well . . . we know the Byers' house is a hot spot, that the thing was able to get through the wall. Maybe we can too, if we can find the house."

The flashlights weren't working, however, and Jessica thought it had something to do with the atmosphere, like maybe batteries didn't work in the Upside Down or something.

It wasn't five minutes later that they heard a wet chewing sound. They had found the creature, and it was feasting on the deer it had drug there. Jessica didn't know if it was evil, but it was definitely a predator. The fact that only two people had gone missing and that it

was willing to eat an animal could mean that it hunted only when it was hungry. Considering there seemed to be nothing left alive in this dimension, it was no wonder that it had to travel somewhere else to eat.

Nancy and Jessica stood still, just staring for about a minute, and then they began backing away. Nancy stepped on a twig and it snapped, causing the creature to jerk its head toward them. It didn't growl or roar. It shrieked, which was scarier in Jessica's opinion. She recognized it from the night she'd found the boys in the woods. The thing had been so close to them that night.

"Run!" she yelled.

They both took off, and Nancy began calling for Jonathan. At first Jessica didn't understand why, because Jonathan wasn't there in that dimension, and all Nancy was doing was giving the creature a sound to track them by, but then she remembered that Joyce had been able to hear Will sometimes because he'd been able to communicate somehow. Jonathan might be able to hear them if there was an opening somewhere

The problem remained, however, of the thing being able to follow the sounds of their voices. But they could hear it too, and this time it was growling.

This thing was probably only defending its territory, but Jessica didn't care. She didn't want to die.

They needed to get out of there.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Chapter Six

Jessica and Nancy had been in the Upside Down for a grand total of maybe twenty minutes when Jonathan's voice led them back to their world. Nancy was sobbing and had pretty much started clinging to Jonathan's neck. Jessica wasn't sobbing. She didn't feel much of anything at all besides a burning desire to get out of those woods.

"I'm going home," she said mechanically. "I have to – my brother."

Dustin and the others had gone looking for an opening. What if they'd found one? What if they'd found one and were stuck in the Upside Down right at that moment?

"You need to check on Mike," she told Nancy. "He and the others know about that place. He – they've heard Will . . . on the walkie-talkie. They went looking for him."

Jessica realized that until just then she'd always, in the back of her mind, believed that they'd only heard Will because they'd wanted to, and that maybe the thing in Nancy's picture was really just an image distortion like Jonathan had suggested at first. She couldn't believe that now.

"You heard Will?" Jonathan asked.

"Well, Mike did. Or . . . he heard a boy singing that Clash song he likes so much." She knew Jonathan probably had questions, and so would Nancy, but she couldn't stick around to answer them. "I'm going home. Come on, if you want a ride, Nancy."

With that, Jessica took the lead and she made it back to the cars before the other two. It didn't matter because Nancy got a ride home from Jonathan. That meant Jessica could just go straight home to check on Dustin. That was better, really.

---

On the way home Jessica had to pull over on the side of the road

because even though she hadn't felt like crying before she did feel like crying then and she'd rather do it alone in her car than at home in front of her mom or Dustin. Her mom wouldn't understand, and Dustin would want to know what was wrong, and how would she explain?

It had just hit her that she could have died that night. She could have disappeared that night, and no one would have known what had happened to her. Her mother would've lost a daughter, and Dustin would've lost a sister. Steve would have lost his best friend. She would have ceased to exist in her true world, and there had been no guarantee she would have survived in the other.

She wasn't even eighteen and she'd been through one of the scariest things anyone could claim to have been through, and she was just done. Done with it all. It was interesting while it had lasted, but she was not killing herself over this. She liked Jonathan and Nancy, but they had all been stupid doing this. She understood why they had, but it had still been stupid. She wanted nothing else to do with it, and she was going to keep Dustin away from it too.

She couldn't lose Dustin the way Jonathan had lost Will.

---

When she got home she felt herself loosen with relief at the sight of her brother's bike in the driveway. At least he'd made it home safely.

Once inside the house she found her mother on the couch in front of the TV. Her mother glanced up at her and then went back to watching the TV before looking at her again.

"Why're you so dirty?"

"What?"

"You look like you've been rolling around in the mud."

She hadn't even noticed, to be honest, but she was filthy. Her skin, her clothes, she didn't even want to think about what was in her hair and under her nails. She hoped she hadn't brought any Upside Down germs with her. That was the last thing she needed, to come down

with some incurable disease.

"I was with Nancy on the trail in the woods and I fell . . . in the mud, like you said. I'm okay. Just learned not to play in the forest at night."

"Don't forget to throw your clothes in the wash."

"Yeah, sure."

Who was she kidding? Jessica wasn't going to wash her clothes. She was going to throw them in the fireplace and burn them.

Dustin was already in his room, though he was not asleep. He was still dressed from earlier after he'd changed from the funeral clothes. He took one look at her and asked what happened.

She quickly shut the door and sat on the bed beside Dustin.

"I saw it. Tonight. In the woods. The thing that took Will."

"What?" Dustin's eyes lit up. "What did it look like?"

"I – I don't know how to describe it. An alien, or . . . I don't know, but it definitely wasn't from here. It has a human-like body except its arms are too long, and the head kind of looks like a rosebud before it opens up."

After a few minutes of Dustin asking more questions about the thing than Jessica had the answers to, she asked him one.

"How did it go with you guys?"

"We got nothing. El led us in a circle."

Dustin then went on to explain how El had been controlling the compasses earlier that day. They'd walked the train tracks for hours only to come out at an old abandoned junk yard. The only reason they'd even figured it out was because Lucas had noticed El's nose bleeding – or noticed the fresh blood on the sleeve of her jacket.

Mike defended El, which Lucas hadn't appreciated, and the two boys had gotten into a physical fight that had ended in El using her powers

to throw Lucas off of Mike. Lucas had landed on the ground, but his back had hit an old, broken down truck first.

"Is he okay?"

Dustin nodded. "I think his pride was hurt more than anything else. Anyway, Mike yelled at El for using her powers on Lucas, and she took off."

"What?"

"Yeah. She's gone. Mike didn't mean to yell –"

"He *shouldn't* have yelled. She probably got scared because he was mad at her. Wherever she came from, I can almost promise that nothing good ever came from someone being angry at her."

Dustin nodded, as if he understood. He probably did. He was pretty perceptive for a boy his age.

"It's just we thought she was trying to help us find Will."

"Yeah. You guys quit that. It's not safe."

"That's what El said."

"She would know. Maybe she took you in a circle because she was trying to keep you safe."

Jessica sighed and turned to face her brother fully. She placed her hands on his shoulders. She needed Dustin to know how serious she was.

"Dustin . . . you can't do this anymore. I . . . I found an opening tonight, Dustie, and I went through it. I went through it, and that thing was there. It was feeding on a deer. I could've died. Everything's dead over there, Dustin."

Even though she hadn't wanted to cry in front of him she began to cry anyway. She knew it made him uncomfortable because she was his sister. He wouldn't just treat her as one of the guys, but he didn't know how to comfort her either.

"Are you . . . okay?"

"No, I'm – I'm terrified. I went to another world and if – if I hadn't been with Nancy and Jonathan, I probably would've been stuck there. It was dark and empty, like Will said. There was nothing there but that thing."

She dropped her hands to her lap. "I'm sorry about Will, Dustin, but unless we can find an opening near where he is over there . . . I don't think we'll be able to get him back."

She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and he allowed her to ruffle his hair when he laid his head against her. She stayed with him for a few minutes to let everything sink in, but then she went to take a very hot and cleansing shower.

The jacket she'd been wearing was filthy, and there was a rip in the arm. She didn't know when it had happened or how, but now it almost made her cry because it had been her father's jacket, and it was the only thing she had of his. It was about two sizes too big, but she loved it. Now she would probably have to trash it. It did make her cry once she was in the shower, warm water soothing out the knots in her body. Physically she felt okay, but emotionally she was a wreck, and she found herself just wanting Steve there even though he knew nothing about what was going on – or maybe because of it, she didn't know. He would make her feel better, though. Sure, he would want to know what was wrong, but he would also just goof off with her until she was smiling again – or at least not close to tears.

---

Not long after her shower she got a call from Nancy, who claimed she couldn't sleep. Jessica probably wouldn't be able to either, but her hair was still wet so she hadn't tried.

Jessica had a phone line in her room that she almost never used because she almost never talked about anything she didn't want anyone else to hear, but that was not the case this time. She closed the door to her room so no one could hear, especially Dustin.

"I was thinking about what you said about Barb."



"Hey, I shouldn't have said that. I was just trying to get you to leave." She really did feel bad about saying what she had even if she did think that it was true.

"If she's not dead, then she's trapped in that place. We have to find that thing again."

"What? And do what? Almost die again? I'm not going back out there. Neither should you."

"Maybe we don't have to. It's a predator, and it hunts at night like a lion or a coyote, but it doesn't hunt in packs like them. It's always alone, like a bear."

"Okay . . ."

"Sharks can detect blood in one part per million, that's one drop of blood per million, and they can smell it from a quarter mile away."

"So, you're saying it can detect blood?" That was definitely not Nancy's voice. That was Jonathan's voice.

"Nancy, why is Jonathan still at your house?"

"I didn't want to be alone. Anyway, the predator thing is just a theory."

"We could test it, but if it works . . ."

"At least we'll know it's coming."

"How exactly do you plan on testing this out? It's not like one of us is going to cut open a vein to draw it out."

When Jessica was met with silence, all she could say was, "No way!"

"This thing hunts at night, right?" Nancy asked. "Well, tomorrow night we'll look for Will at his house. He's communicated there plenty of times. Maybe we can get him out."

Of course they had to play the Will card, and of course she would help if there was a real chance to find him. She'd freaked out earlier

and backed out because . . . well, it was the smart thing to do, wasn't it? She still didn't want Dustin anywhere near it. Besides, if they could get rid of the thing, maybe they would be able to find Will and Barb without having to worry about it.

"I'm so gonna regret this, but . . . okay. I'm working tomorrow from two to eight, so wait until I get off and I'll meet you at the house."

"Meet us in the morning at the supply store. We can get a few things we may need to face this thing."

"Like dynamite, maybe?" Jessica asked, only half joking.

"Hey, we are not blowin' up my house," Jonathan said, causing Jessica to realize that he hadn't only been listening to Nancy's side of the conversation.

"Why not? We find this thing and kill it, we'll probably make enough money that you'll be able to buy a new one," Jessica teased. "Anyway, see you guys in the morning. Is ten okay?"

They all agreed it was.

---

Dustin was already gone when Jessica awoke the next morning. She figured he'd gone to Mike's. She hoped they had a plan to find El, and that Mike and Lucas would work things out. Mike needed to understand that Lucas was probably jealous. Mike had never really had a crush on someone before, and now he was paying a lot of attention to El, someone he had met only a few days ago. Lucas probably felt as if he were losing his best friend.

Lucas and Mike had been friends before Jessica and Dustin had even moved to Hawkins. It had been Mike, Lucas, and Will for the longest time, but they had allowed Dustin to join their circle fairly easily once they found out that they had so much in common, science-wise.

So, yes, Lucas probably felt jealous and a little hurt, and Mike needed to realize that. But Lucas needed to realize something too. Mike could like a girl and still be friends with him.

Jessica left her house around nine-thirty, grabbed an apple from the

kitchen on the way, and reached the Supply Store at the same time as Nancy and Jonathan.

Jessica's eyebrows rose as she wondered whether Jonathan had spent the night at the Wheeler's, in Nancy's room. It wasn't her business, so she didn't ask, but she still wanted to know – mostly because Nancy was with Steve, so she shouldn't have had another guy in her room.

"Hey," she said.

She noticed that Nancy had dark circles around her eyes. It appeared she hadn't slept very well even after having talked on the phone.

"Hey," the other two said.

"This shouldn't take long," Jonathan added.

"Good."

Inside the store, right inside the door, was the head of a bear, its mouth open in a roar. Jonathan went past it and headed straight for the aisle where the gas cans were on display.

"So we can't blow his house up, but we can set it on fire?" Jessica quipped, and Nancy grinned.

"It's for the thing."

"Right."

Jessica followed Nancy, who picked up a handful of huge nails and a hammer.

"I don't think you want to get close enough to hammer nails into this thing."

"They're for the bat."

"Hm. I don't want to get close enough to use a bat either."

"Yeah." Nancy stopped walking and turned to face her. "We're all scared, Jess."

"Right." Jessica's eyes began to burn with unshed tears. "It's just . . . whatever this is . . . this thing, it's not supposed to exist, and here we are planning to lure it out and kill it, and we can't tell anyone. And we're just teenagers, and Dustin's just a kid and he was planning on going after it too. What if he had found the opening last night instead of us? What if Mike had?"

"But they didn't," Jonathan said from behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Besides, we *know* there's a way back now. If they had found a way in . . . we would have gotten them back, just like we're gonna get Will back."

Jessica nodded, sniffled, and took a deep breath.

"A'right. I hear you. I'm just a little freaked out."

They picked up a bear trap and some lighter fluid. Jessica added a machete to their supply list. On the way to the checkout counter, Nancy picked up a high-powered flashlight. They had lost theirs the night before in the woods. At the counter, Jonathan picked up four boxes of .38s.

The guy behind the counter asked what they were doing with the stuff they were buying, and Nancy actually said they were monster hunting. The guy basically rolled his eyes and then rang them up.

"Monster hunting?" Jonathan asked as they took the stuff to his car and put it in the trunk.

"You know, last week . . . I was shopping for a new top I thought Steve might like. It took me and Barb all weekend. It seemed like life-and-death, you know? And now . . ."

"You're shopping for bear traps with Jonathan Byers."

"Yeah."

"What's the weirdest part? Me or the bear trap?"

"You. Definitely you," Nancy said almost immediately, but there was no malice in her voice.

"What I find weird is dressing for someone other than yourself," Jessica said. "I've never given a second thought to what anyone thinks about *my* clothes."

Just then a guy in a red Mustang drove by and beeped. He shouted at Nancy – something about a movie.

"What was that?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't know," Nancy said, but Jessica heard the worry in her voice.

Nancy looked in the direction she would have to go if she were going to the theater and then began running towards it.

"Nancy, wait!" Jonathan said, and began to follow.

Jessica sighed and took off after her two new friends. Why was there so much drama in her life? She used to be so good at avoiding it, and now . . .

She passed a doughnut shop and a furniture store, and then crossed the street to reach the theater. Nancy was staring up at the marquee, which showed the name of the new movie playing that week, All the Right Moves, in black letters. Underneath that, in red spray paint, were the words Starring Nancy 'The Slut' Wheeler.

Nancy had tears in her eyes and Jessica tensed as a red, hot anger filled her. Tommy and Carol must've decided to get at Nancy about sleeping with Steve even though it wasn't any of their business. Had she made them angry or something? Not that they should have done this at all, but there had to be a reason, right?

"Nancy, don't – don't look at it. It doesn't matter. It'll wash, and other people will forget about it the next time someone does something worth talking about."

The reason Jessica had said other people would forget was because she knew Nancy wouldn't. Tommy and Carol were –

A laugh came from the alley beside the theater, so Jessica headed that way, along with Nancy and Jonathan. She hadn't expected to find Tommy and Carol. She *really* hadn't expected to find Steve there.

Nicole was along for the ride.

Tommy was using a spray can – caught red handed, so to speak. Jessica hoped Steve had only just arrived, and that he didn't have anything to do with what was written on the theater marquee. She almost prayed he had nothing to do with it, while already trying to brace herself for that fact that he probably had.

"You're writing is terrible," Carol told Tommy.

When Carol noticed their presence she said to Nancy, "Hey, there, Princess." Tommy added, "Aw, she looks upset."

Jessica noticed that Tommy had been spray painting 'Byers is a perv' on the alley wall. He'd been doing that, and Steve had let him. That just added weight to the thought that he'd let Tommy write about Nancy too.

Nancy, who had stomped right up to Steve, now slapped him right in the face. Jessica felt no desire to come to his defense. She felt he deserved whatever Nancy threw at him.

"What's wrong with you?" Nancy demanded.

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with you? I was worried about you. I can't believe that I was actually worried about you."

"What're you talking about?" Nancy asked.

Jessica shared a look with Jonathan, who seemed upset for Nancy, but also confused. It seemed all three of them were at a loss. The others knew something they didn't.

"I wouldn't lie if I were you," Carol said. "You don't wanna be known as the *lying* slut now, do you?"

"Steve?" Jessica spoke up. "What's going on? Why are those words up on the place where I work? By the way, vandalism is a crime, you know? Hate to have your parents have to come back into town right after they just left last night, especially after they had to come back once already because you couldn't keep your crap together."

She hated bringing that up, but if her boss called the police and she was asked about it, she wouldn't lie just to protect Steve, not when he was actually guilty.

Steve seemed wounded by her comment and she hated having brought up his parents even more, but she wouldn't take it back.

Nancy figured it out before Jessica or Jonathan did, and she asked Steve, "Did you come by last night?" When Steve just continued staring at her, Nancy continued. "Look, I don't know what you think you saw, but it wasn't like that."

"Yeah, I'm sure you let him in your room just to . . . study."

"Or for another pervy photo session," Tommy said.

"We were just –"

"Just what?" Steve asked. "Finish that sentence."

The thing was . . . Nancy couldn't honestly finish the sentence. Jessica could see how Steve had jumped to the conclusion he had, especially if he'd seen Nancy and Jonathan together the night before. And he had a thing about cheating, anyway. It was one of his insecurities, because he'd grown up knowing his dad cheated on his mom. He still had no right to do what he'd done, even if Nancy had done what Steve seemed to think she had, which she hadn't.

"Finish. The. Sentence," Steve said again, staring Nancy down. When she couldn't, he turned away from her. "Go to Hell, Nancy."

"Come on, Nancy. Let's just go," Jonathan said, and grabbed her arm to gently pull her away.

"You know, Byers, I'm actually a little impressed. I always took you for a queer, but I guess you're just a little screw-up like your father."

Steve pushed Jonathan, not hard enough to make him fall, but enough to make him stumble a little.

"That house is full of screw-ups." Steve pushed him again. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I mean, a bunch of screw-ups in your family."

Your *mom* . . . I'm not even surprised what happened to your brother."

"Steve! Stop!" Jessica shouted. She didn't want to hear the words coming out of his mouth. She couldn't believe he was saying them, not her Steve. *He* wouldn't, but Tommy's and Carol's would. "Please stop."

"Why? Because you're asking me to, Golden Girl?"

Her breath caught in her throat painfully – he'd never called her that in a derogatory way, in an insulting way until just then - and she whispered, "Yes."

"Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but the entire Byers family is a disgrace to –"

And with that Jonathan had had enough. He threw a punch that landed on Steve's jaw. It was powerful enough to make Steve lose his balance and have to catch himself on the wall. It wasn't powerful enough to make Steve fall down, though, and he quickly tackled Jonathan to the ground and they both began wrestling, neither guy really landing any blows at first.

It wasn't until Carol and Nancy started screaming that Steve tried to get up, and Jonathan punched him again. This time Steve did fall, and Tommy tried to get involved. Steve wasn't really hurt, however, and he really wanted Jonathan for himself, no help from the others, so he told Tommy to stay out of it.

Steve hit Jonathan again, not enough to fell him, and then Jonathan just started waling on Steve, hard enough that Steve couldn't get up between hits.

"Jonathan, stop!" Nancy screamed. "You're gonna hurt him."

It was true. And though Jessica hadn't liked how Steve had been acting, and even though he'd deserved a punch or two, she didn't really want him hurt. She didn't actually want to get involved either, though, because she could get hurt if she got between them.

Someone must've seen the fight and called the police, because Jessica



suddenly heard sirens. Tommy suddenly grabbed Jonathan and screamed, "He's had enough, he's had enough!"

Since Tommy had Jonathan, Jessica quickly went to Steve to help him up. He was able to stand easily enough, and she pulled him to the side so he could lean against the wall. His lip was busted, and there was blood coming from his eyebrow. There were other bruises and cuts, but his lip and brow were the worst of it.

"You deserved some of that," she told him. Even so, she touched his cheek – the one that had taken the least amount of damage. "You owe Nancy an apology. She's not sleeping with Jonathan, and there was a reason he was with her last night."

"You knew?"

"Not until . . . I mean, I knew he was over there last night, but I didn't know he'd spent the night until this morning."

"How do you know what they were doing last night? I thought you were going to be with Dustin all day yesterday?"

"I – I was, but he wanted to spend time with Mike and Lucas, so I hung out with Nancy and Jonathan."

"Yeah, and since when are you friends with Nancy?" He was being so defensive, she really didn't know what to do.

"Um . . . two days ago? Maybe. I don't know. I'm helping her with something, and we may not even be friends after that, but she's okay. And not a slut."

A cop car pulled into the alleyway, parked, and two cops got out. Tommy, Carol, and Nicole took off, grabbing Steve on the way, so that only Jessica, Jonathan, and Nancy were left behind. In the end, Jonathan was taken in because he pushed an officer away when the guy began checking him over. Jessica didn't really think it had anything to do with the officer being pushed. It was more to do with the fact that the police officer escorted them back to their cars to make sure that the others didn't come back, and each of their cars had to be checked. The cops found the supplies in Jonathan's trunk

and had some serious questions for him.

Because Jessica and Nancy had been with Jonathan, they got taken in too. Jessica was going to kill Steve the next time she saw him, she really was.

---

"I gotta go home and change for work," Jessica told the dispatch woman at the police department. Jessica was pretty sure the woman's name was Flo. She was a sweet black-haired lady.

"Work can wait," she said.

Jessica thought it really could. If she went in, she would have to help wash those stupid words off of the marquee, and she didn't want to be responsible for that. Every time she thought of the red paint and the words they spelled out she felt a surge of anger unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

She couldn't believe Steve had allowed Tommy to do what he'd done. She really couldn't. She also couldn't believe that she'd been craving Steve's company the night before. When had he become this person? This guy who would allow his friends to disrespect his girlfriend that way?

"How long are we going to have to stay here?" Nancy asked after they had been there for almost an hour.

Chief Hopper wasn't in the office at the moment and Jonathan would have to wait to talk to him before he could leave. The cops who had brought them in – Jonathan in a cop car, Jessica and Nancy in their own cars – didn't want Jonathan leaving until Hopper got to look at the supplies from Jonathan's trunk.

They'd been waiting anyway, so Hopper could get statements from all three of them, but it didn't look like he was going to be back any time soon, so now Flo was fixing some ice for Jonathan, whose cheek was beginning to swell.

"You guys will be able to leave as soon as you fill out a formal statement about what happened. It shouldn't take more than a half-hour." To Nancy specifically, she said, "Your boyfriend, however, is

being held for assault on a police officer."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Well, you should tell him that. Only love makes you that crazy . . . and stupid."

Jessica sighed. "He didn't even hurt the guy, he barely touched him."

"He still pushed a police officer."

Flo handed Nancy the ice, which was wrapped in a towel, and then took them back into the main room of the police department so they could write up their statements. Jessica was pretty sure they were supposed to have parents present but was glad no one had been called.

Jessica didn't lie on her report, but she held back a little. She did put that Jonathan threw the first punch, but Steve provoked him verbally and physically

She regretted threatening to get Steve in trouble now that she really was filing a report against him. She regretted even more bringing up his parents. They would probably be called now that the police were getting statements about how he started all this crap, and he was going to really get it if his dad had to come back after having just left.

## 7. Chapter 7

### Chapter Seven

Jessica couldn't get her mind off of what Steve had been a part of. He'd allowed Tommy and Carol to paint those awful words in a place where anyone could see them – they were on the main street in town. He'd let them do it even though he'd claimed to actually care about Nancy. He shouldn't have done it to anyone, but definitely not to someone he had feelings for.

What if it had been her? Steve . . . would he have let Tommy and Carol say those things about her if she'd done something he didn't like? He already allowed them to treat her as an outsider just because she wasn't a partier and didn't get stupid-drunk when she did hang out with them at parties.

On the drive home from the police station Jessica's anger pretty much dissipated, but her disappointment remained as strong as ever. Steve Harrington was not this person; she didn't want him to be this person, someone who would break other people's stuff, someone who would lash out just because things weren't going his way.

Why was she still friends with him? They hadn't been Steve and Jessica in so long she barely remembered what it felt like. No, she had just been the girl who hung around three of the cool kids in eleventh grade.

At home, she made herself a sandwich, ate only half of it, and then went upstairs to dress for work.

She told her mom that she wouldn't be home right after work because she was hanging out with friends.

"Steve?"

"No, Mom. Other people. Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers. I'll call if I'm gonna be out past midnight."

---

When Jessica parked her car in front of the theater she saw that Bill, her boss, was in the middle of washing the paint off of the marquee. He was up on a super-high ladder and his eyes practically lit up when he spotted her getting out of the car.

Great. She knew what she would be doing for most of her shift. Standing on the top rung of a ladder trying to keep her balance while washing off those stupid words. She hated heights; she was terrified of them.

If she fell and killed herself, she was going to haunt Steve Harrington forever.

---

A few blocks over, Steve was sitting on the trunk of his car outside a Fair Mart convenient store. Tommy had gone in to get him some Aspirin and a soda. Steve's head was killing him where Byers had nailed him right above his left eyebrow. His lip and nose were busted, and there was a slash across his cheek.

"Don't worry," Tommy said once he came back out. "He'll need more than Aspirin when we're done with him."

"If the creep ever gets out," Carol added. "The cops should just lock him up forever. Did you see the look on his face?"

Carol fake punched Tommy and tried to look angry.

"He probably had the same look on his face whenever he killed his brother, right?"

Tommy swatted Steve on the shoulder in a brotherly fashion, but Steve wasn't feeling very familial at the moment. He couldn't get Nancy's face out of his mind. He'd really hurt her; she'd been angry when she'd reached them, which was understandable, but it was the tears that had been in her eyes that Steve couldn't get out of his head. He hadn't enjoyed hurting her. And Jonathan had snapped, in a way that Steve hadn't expected because Byers had always appeared so passive in everything.

And then there was Jessica. She hadn't really exhibited any anger,

but he'd disappointed her by going along with Tommy and Carol. Tommy had been the one with the paint can, but Steve hadn't done anything to stop him from doing what he'd done, which made Steve just as much of a jerk as the other two.

Nancy had been right. He had gone to her house the night before, to sneak in and see her, because he'd been worried about how she'd been acting – basically finding reasons not to be around him since they'd slept together. He wanted to know why, wanted to know if he'd done anything to upset her aside from the Barb thing, because he'd already apologized for that. He'd found Byers in Nancy's bed, sitting beside her, his jacket around her, and Nancy had allowed it.

Needless to say, he left feeling jealous and hurt. Tommy and Carol had gone with him to Nancy's house because he hadn't planned on staying long at all, just go in and make sure she was okay, and then leave again. They had been the first ones he'd been with, and so they were the ones he talked to, ranted to, more like, and that was when Tommy thought of the brilliant idea of letting everyone else know what Nancy had done. If Steve hadn't been so upset, he wouldn't have agreed. He probably would've knocked Tommy's teeth in.

As it was, one impulsive decision had hurt the two people he cared most about.

"Oh, I just got an image of him making that face while he and Nancy were screwing."

"And, hey, Jessica was *with* them. What if he's doing her too? Our little Golden Girl." Tommy said. "What if it's like some weird triangle thing?"

"For once in your life, just shut your mouths," Steve snapped, honestly not knowing who he was angrier for – Jessica or Nancy. He knew he didn't like Tommy calling Jessica *their* Golden Girl.

Carol had been smiling, joking around, and she seemed confused about Steve's statement. Maybe she really didn't understand why he was upset. Maybe she didn't understand what she was doing was wrong, that her actions had consequences.

"What's your problem?" Tommy asked.

"You're both assholes. That's my problem."

"Are you serious right now?"

"Yeah, I'm serious," Steve answered and stood up from the car. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Done what? Call Nancy out for what she really is? I don't remember you asking me to stop."

Steve walked to the driver side door, opened the door, but turned to face Tommy.

"I should've put that spray paint right down your throat. You know, neither of you ever really cared about her, you never even liked her, because she's not miserable like you two. She actually cares about other people."

"A slut with a heart of gold," Carol quipped.

"I told you to watch your mouth."

"Hey!" Tommy exclaimed, pushing Steve against the car. "I don't know what's gotten into you, man, but you don't talk to her that way."

"Get out of my face." Steve shoved back, thinking he was about to get into his second fight that day.

"Or what? You gonna fight me now too? Because you couldn't take Jonathan Byers, so I wouldn't recommend it."

To be honest, Tommy had never been in a real fight, not that Steve had ever seen. Tommy had never had to fight anyone one-on-one. He'd always had someone fighting with him on his side. Steve was actually pretty certain that if he hadn't been hurt, he could've taken Tommy, but he was, so . . .

In the end, Tommy just wasn't worth the effort, and Steve left. He drove the very short distance to the theater, saw Jessica on a ladder –

a bucket of something and a rag on the top rung – scrubbing at the marquee. The word 'starring' and Nancy's first name had already been washed away, but 'The Slut' Wheeler was still there, plain as day. The words made him feel sick to his stomach now.

Some other worker was there keeping the ladder steady.

"Need a hand?" he called up to her.

She glanced down. At first, she appeared to want to ignore him, but then she began to come down. She gripped the sides of the ladder tightly. Steve could see her arms shaking. He knew she hated heights. He didn't know why, but she was terrified of them.

Once on the ground she said, "You look awful."

"Yeah."

"I thought you'd only busted your lip and eyebrow, but your nose and cheek got hit pretty good too."

The blood had hidden most of the damage to the last two, but once he'd cleaned his face as well as he'd been able to without a bathroom he'd been able to see the gashes along with the swelling and bruising from all the blows that had landed.

"Who knew Jonathan Byers could fight?" Steve quipped.

Jessica's face tightened and she told the other guy – the one that had been holding the ladder – that he could go on inside. She'd hold the ladder steady for Steve. So he went in, and Jessica turned back to him.

"Do you even know why we were mad at you? Why Nancy was upset? Why Jonathan was?"

"I never should've let Tommy and Carol do this." He pointed at the leftover words. "They were with me last night when I went to check on Nancy. That's how I found out. Byers was in Nancy's bed and they were hugging. I – What was I supposed to think? So when Tommy brought up –" he gestured again at the words "- I thought 'sure, she hurt me, so why not?' I realize it was stupid and childish, but . . .



There it is."

Jessica crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you sorry?"

"Would I be here if I wasn't?"

"Hm. Jonathan hates his dad. When you compared him to him . . . But he loves his mom, and you insulted her. You pretty much insulted Will too."

"If it's any consolation, I ditched Tommy and Carol."

"For good?"

Steve nodded. "They do nothing but cause trouble."

"I've been telling you that." Jessica gestured toward the ladder. "Go ahead and get started. We can still talk."

"About why you've been hanging around with Nancy and Byers?"

"Sure," she answered. "Though I don't know why it matters."

---

Talk they did. Jessica told him about why she'd taken to hanging around Nancy and Jonathan. She explained the picture of Barb at his house, and the creature Jonathan had gotten a shot of.

"We went to him to see if there was some kind of explanation, but Jonathan couldn't think of one. We went with him to the dark room at the school so he could mess around with it. The . . . thing was still in the frame."

"The creature that Nancy saw in the woods outside my house?"

"Yeah."

"Well, she was just freaked out. Wasn't she?"

"If you say so, but Jonathan's mom says she's seen it too."

"Yeah, but Joyce Byers isn't –"

"Be careful how you finish that sentence. I'll let go of the ladder. Besides, you're supposed to be turning over a new leaf. Don't ruin it already."

She grinned to show him she'd basically forgiven him already, but he still had some making up to do. It was only fair. Plus, she wanted to know how serious he was about becoming a nice guy – or at least a non-jerk. But he'd had a point. Joyce Byers alone was not a great witness – she'd had too many anxiety episodes where she'd shut everything and everyone out, where she'd basically shut herself down. It wasn't hard for people to not take her seriously.

"I've seen it too," she admitted. "That's why I've been hanging out with Nancy and Jonathan. I . . . it's not as lonely when I'm with people who understand."

That wasn't technically a lie. It was true of her new friendships with everyone. She was a part of something huge in both of her new groups. The kids were harboring a girl that people were searching for – the people were probably working for the government and could seriously hurt them were they ever found out – and then there were Nancy and Jonathan and the creature.

She still thought they were crazy for having gone after it the night before. They were even crazier for what they were planning to do that night.

If they didn't kill the monster, it would probably kill them, but they had to try for Will.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't see it until last night. And after what happened this morning . . ."

"Right."

"We think maybe this is the thing that got Will and Barb. Jonathan and Nancy went hunting for it . . . I went with them."

"What?" Steve said, louder than necessary – loud enough that people across the street looked their way. In his excitement he made the

ladder move within her hands, causing her to grip it more firmly and yell at him to be careful. Then . . .

"I know. It was stupid, but . . . aside from Joyce, we didn't think the adults would believe us. They wouldn't do anything . . . so we did."

Once all the paint was off and Steve was down from the ladder, it was almost five o'clock. Jessica had a break coming up at six, and Steve promised to bring her a chocolate milkshake from the diner they'd eaten at the other night.

"Shouldn't you be buying *Nancy* a milkshake?" Not that she wasn't pleased about him wanting to spend time with her, but . . . Nancy was his girlfriend. Or had been, at least.

"She probably doesn't want to see me at the moment."

"True enough." Jessica shrugged. "See you at six then."

---

Jessica spent the next hour behind the counter of the concession stand. She stayed fairly busy since it was a Saturday and people that held steady nine-to-five jobs were just getting off work and were able to see a movie if they wanted. Most were teenage couples, however, and Jessica was in constant motion of putting popcorn in bags or buckets, and filling cups with soda. She probably could have done it with her eyes closed, it had become that much of a routine to her.

She was glad she'd talked to Steve even though she hadn't been able to tell him everything, especially not about Eleven because that information could actually be dangerous for him to know. But at least he knew some of why she'd been acting the way she had been. No, she hadn't been doing anything too weird by normal standards, but by her standards . . . yes, she'd been weird.

Steve brought her a milkshake like he'd said he would, and they shared it since she had only a fifteen-minute break.

"So . . . I think I should warn you that they took Jonathan in earlier," she said. "He pushed one of the cops."

"I saw him get taken in. We went back to the alley and you guys had

already gone, but when we came out to the main street we saw Jonathan in the back of the cop car."

Jessica felt a short bout of anger go through her at them staying hidden, but she got back to the point.

"Nancy and I were taken in too. We followed the cops back to the station."

Steve's brown eyes widened. He was truly concerned. "You didn't get in trouble, did you?"

"No. Neither of us did, but they held Jonathan for 'assaulting a police officer.' He didn't even leave a bruise on him. It's stupid."

She couldn't tell him about the weapons because he'd definitely ask about that, but she could tell him what she really wanted him to know.

"They made me and Nancy fill out an official statement about what happened. And I . . . had to tell the truth as I saw it. They didn't ask about the spray paint stuff, so I didn't mention it. I did put down that Jonathan hit you first, but that it was provoked . . . by you . . . and Tommy and Carol. Nicole was there, but she wasn't really involved, exactly."

"Jess!"

"I couldn't lie to the cops, Steve, because then I would get in trouble if they found out. I love you, but I'm not doing that! If you cared about me, you wouldn't want me to do that."

Steve made a worried – very worried – expression and said, "I know, I know that. You're right. I know you're right. I was just thinking about having to talk to the cops twice in one week and how my dad is gonna kill me."

"I know. I thought about that the whole time I was filling that thing out. I left as much out as possible. The two officers seemed to have the same IQ as my shoe size, so as long as Chief Hopper doesn't make a big deal out of it, you should be fine. Jonathan has a few bruises and that's it. He won't press charges. Your dad probably won't even

know what's going on."

That seemed to help Steve relax a little, but he also seemed a little ashamed.

"Steve?"

"Why would you even do that?"

"I don't know. Because even though you've been acting like a jerk, especially this week and towards Jonathan, you're still my best friend, and I still love you. I was kind of waiting for you to see how bad Tommy and Carol were for you. And now you have."

She let him think about that for a minute and then spoke again.

"I can't come over tonight. Something came up."

"Something always seems to come up lately," he said. "Is it because of earlier?"

"No. But if nothing had come up, I wouldn't have hung out with you because of that, so good on you for catching that."

"Right."

"Anyway, you should go home, put some ice on your face. You cleaned it pretty good, but . . . everything's swollen."

"Think my pretty face will be okay?"

"It'll survive," she said and laughed. "I'll hang out with you tomorrow. Just don't go back to Tommy and Carol."

---

Jessica was scheduled to get off at eight, but at around seven-forty-five Chief Hopper showed up outside the movie theater. If he was coming because of the words that had been there earlier, he was a little late.

Then she noticed that Dustin was with him, along with Mike, Lucas, and Eleven. What the hell? Why were the kids with the Chief of

Police, and how much did he know about the girl in the backseat of his car?

"Are you able to leave here?" he asked her.

"Uh . . . I get off at 8:00," she answered.

She was still behind the concession counter, and Hopper had jumped in front of the four people that were waiting to order.

"Can you meet us at the Byers' place once you get off?"

"I was going there after work anyway. Is everything okay? Why is my brother in your car? Is he in trouble?"

"He's fine, and he's not in trouble," Hopper said, hands up in a placating gesture. "We need to talk about *everything* that's been going on. Dustin says you know about all this."

"Uh . . ." They really couldn't say anything other than that in public. "I'll meet you there, and we can talk. Like you said."

Hopper left and then Bill asked if everything was okay. That day had been the strangest since the one where one of the machines had gone on the fritz for no reason.

"I don't know. I hope so."

---

When Jessica got to the Byers' house, everyone was already there inside, and Mike was explaining to Joyce, Hopper, Nancy, and Jonathan the acrobat and the flea theory that Mr. Clarke had told them. Then he explained about the gateway.

"Is this gate underground?" Hopper asked.

"Yes," El answered.

"Near a large water tank?"

"Yes."

"How d'you know that?" Dustin asked.

"He's seen it."

"Wait," Jessica interrupted. "I've been at work for the past six hours. What'd I miss?"

Because she'd obviously missed *something*. Last she'd checked, they hadn't wanted any adults knowing about any of this, and definitely no authority figures who could just turn El into child services.

Dustin began to explain about how these bullies had been picking on him and Mike, and about how El had saved them. It sounded serious, a knife had been involved, and whoever this kid was had basically told Mike that unless he jumped off the cliff they were standing on then he was going to cut Dustin's remaining teeth out.

"What?" she exclaimed. "Who is this kid?"

She knew there were bigger things at the moment, but Dustin was her brother and he'd been threatened with a knife. Whoever this kid was might be a psychopath in the making.

"It's okay. Mike jumped, but El kept him from hitting the ground."

Now it was Nancy's turn to be shocked and worried. Mike had actually jumped to keep Dustin from being hurt – though the bully might have just been all talk even if he'd had a knife – and he would've died if El hadn't have been there.

Then there was something about how El had been the one to create the rift in the universe. She hadn't done it on purpose, but she'd somehow caused it, which had allowed the creature to get to their world.

Lucas added his part, which was that he'd followed his compass north and had ended up at Hawkins Lab, which had military-like security. Science people drove white vans in and out of the fence that surrounded the place; guys in military garb drove Humvees.

The white van people had chased the three boys and El on bikes. El had caused an accident by flipping one of the vans and then the kids

were able to get away.

"Okay . . . but where do you fit in?" Jessica asked Hopper.

"I found them in that old junkyard out past the railroad tracks. They were hiding in a bus." Hopper looked at Nancy. "We contacted them using the walkie-talkies, and Mike told me where they were. I've been figuring things out slowly over the past couple of days. I broke into the lab, began making connections."

Apparently, the lab had begun experimenting on women in the seventies, and there had been other experiments dating back to the fifties, but not in Hawkins. The lab people were curious about the effect of certain drugs when they were administered to humans. They basically kept the women coked up on whatever they were giving them – and this was all legal because the women had signed up for it, were getting paid a few hundred dollars while receiving free drugs.

One of the women had been pregnant when the experimenting had begun. She supposedly hadn't known. Whether she had or not, she'd been told she'd miscarried even though she remembered vividly having the baby, and the doctor – a Dr. Brenner – taking the baby from her. Supposedly, the doctors were certain that all the drugs would have given the baby certain telekinetic powers.

Like El's powers. But if she was number 011 then the others that had come before her had to have gone through the same treatment. Maybe the doctors went after pregnant women specifically or something.

"What made you break into the lab?"

"State officials began taking over the case. The person who supposedly found Will's body was a guy from the state. The medical examiner was from the state. Those guys don't usually get involved unless it's something heavy that they might need to cover up. The body they pulled out of the quarry wasn't Will. It wasn't even a real body. It was a rubber life-like doll, basically. It was stuffed with the crap you put in teddy bears."

All this because Will had disappeared into a place that he shouldn't



have been able to get to in the first place. Scientists were always messing with things they shouldn't be messing with. They always questioned if they could do things, not whether or not they should do them.

"Do you think you could find Will in this Upside Down?" Joyce asked El.

"And my friend Barb?" Nancy asked.

"Whenever she uses her power, she gets weak," Mike said.

"The more energy she uses, the more tired she gets."

"Like, she flipped the van earlier."

"But she's drained. Like a bad battery."

"Well, h-how do we make her better?" Joyce asked.

"We don't. We just have to wait and try again."

"Well, how long?" Nancy asked.

"I dunno."

El did try, though, for a long while, but she couldn't find them. She seemed like she couldn't make the connection like she normally could. She was too tired. She began to cry when she couldn't do what they wanted. Jessica hoped it was because she was scared that they would hurt her for not being able to do what they needed her to do.

"You probably just need food and a nap," Jessica said. "We can try again later."

El nodded and stood up. "Bathroom."

Joyce told her where to go, and everyone waited for her to come back. When she did she seemed afraid and reluctant to speak, but she did.

"The bath. I can find them in the bath."

She looked like she would rather do anything else, but she also seemed to be determined to help.

"Why the bath?" Jessica asked.

"Water," El answered. "I – when . . . there was water. It was dark, quiet."

"Sensory deprivation tank," Dustin said.

This led to a twenty-minute conversation over the phone between Dustin and Mr. Clarke, and they were in need of a swimming pool and fifteen-hundred pounds of salt.

"We have the salt for the roads," Hopper said. "For when it snows."

"It's not supposed to snow next week, is it?"

"Worst case, no school."

---

Everyone ended up at the middle school, Hopper letting them in with his master key. He and Jonathan were in charge of getting the salt together. The salt was kept in one of the bigger storage rooms outside the school. Jessica didn't know why.

Jessica was with Lucas and Dustin. They were in charge of setting the pool up; Nancy and Mike had gone to get two large hoses so they could fill up the pool. It was one of those flimsy kid ones. Joyce had bought one the year before so kids could bob for apples.

Joyce was with El, helping prepare the girl for whatever she was going to do.

Anyway, setting up the pool was harder than it should have been. Maybe because they were in the gym – they needed the faucets from one of the locker rooms because the temperature had to be controlled. Not too hot and not too cold, because El had to be in it and she couldn't focus on what she was doing if she wasn't comfortable.

"How does this even work?" Dustin asked.

Mostly Jessica just stood there, amused, as the two boys struggled to keep the sides up. She knew that the pool wouldn't be steady until water started filling it.

When the pool was finally set up, filled and salted, everyone just stood back for a minute. No one but El really knew what to expect now. Sure, Mike had seen her communicate with Will via walkie-talkie, but no one had seen her do this. Just in case, Mike had brought the walkie-talkie with him and had set it up near the pool.

"What's the salt for?" Jessica asked.

"Helps her float."

It was true. They tested it with an egg, which would usually fall to the bottom of a container filled with water, and it stayed on the surface.

Joyce had made some goggles wrapped in duct tape for El. Something about keeping all her senses focused inward, so the goggles would keep it dark for her.

El took off Mike's watch and gave it back to him before stepping into the pool. Almost as soon as she was laid out in the water the lights in the gym went off. Everybody jumped. They were all kneeling around the pool, watching El, keeping an eye on her. She'd been afraid of doing this, but she was doing it anyway.

El said Barbara's name, and then began breathing heavily. The lights flickered on and then turned back off.

"What's going on?" Nancy asked. "The lights . . ."

"I don't know. Best guess is that El is doing it."

"Is Barb okay?" Nancy asked El. "Is she okay?"

"Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone." El just kept repeating that word, and Nancy put a hand over her mouth when she realized that meant that Barb was probably dead.

El began to convulse slightly, so Joyce grabbed her arm.

"It's okay. It's okay. We're right here with you. We're right here with you. You're safe."

The words eventually worked, and El began to relax. Then she started talking about Castle Byers, Will's little fort in the woods. He'd made the thing himself. Was that where he was on the other side? If that was the case, they'd been right there the night before. She and Nancy had been right there.

El made contact with Will, and his voice came through the radio Mike had set up.

"Where is this place?" Hopper asked.

"Uh, it's in the woods behind our house," Joyce answered.

"He used to go there to hide," Jonathan added.

El continued and then her voice began coming through the radio too.

"Can you tell him I'm coming? He needs to stay where he is. Mommy's coming."

After a few minutes of that, El was back with them. Whimpers had begun to come from her and the radio voice, and she'd startled awake or back into consciousness or whatever.

Joyce hugged her close as El began to cry. It hit Jessica then that El had probably never been comforted by a mother.

They had accomplished what they had set out to, though. They'd found out Will was alive, and they'd found out Barb wasn't.

Joyce and Hopper left Jonathan, Jessica, and Nancy in charge of the younger ones, and then they took off for the lab. Now that they knew that Will wasn't on this side, they knew they needed to find a way to the Upside Down. The only certain gateway was at Hawkins Lab.

---

"We have to go back to the station," Nancy said.

"What for?"

"They took our weapons."

"All of them?"

"Yeah. Hopper saw them at the station because one of the other officers confiscated them. That's really what started all this," Jonathan said. "When Hopper saw them, he gave me a chance to explain and so I told him everything. He still wouldn't give the stuff back."

"Wow. Did he know what we were planning on doing with those weapons?"

She would totally understand not giving their weapons back if he thought they were going to go after that creature. The thing was that they were still planning on going after this thing, so they needed those weapons back.

"You guys go ahead," Jessica said. "I'll meet you at the house. I'm gonna make sure the others are okay on their own."

So that was what she did.

The others were still in the gym, seated on the bleachers. El was wrapped in a blanket, head against Mike's shoulder. Lucas was on the other side of Mike, and Dustin was seated on the row behind them.

"Hey," she said to get their attention. "I'm gonna meet Nancy and Jonathan at his house. We're gonna kill this thing. Finding Will is important, but it won't keep anyone else from being hurt or taken. This thing has gotta go."

"What?" Dustin exclaimed. "Are you crazy?"

"Just as crazy as you guys planning on finding the gate and going into it. Anyway, you guys can't go home, so I just need to know that you'll be okay here. By yourselves."

It was true. The government people had figured out who had been helping El – or at least that the boys were. They couldn't go home because their homes were being watched. According to Hopper, some of the phones had even been bugged, so if they called home the

government would know.

Dustin stood up, walked down the two rows of bleachers to reach the ground, and grabbed her in a tight but brief hug. She knew then that no matter how cool Dustin tried to be, he was really worried.

"I'll be okay. If . . . if it gets too heavy in there, I'll get us out of there. Okay?"

"Don't die," El said from her spot next to Mike.

"Not planning to."

"Don't die," Dustin repeated.

More seriously now, "Not planning to. I'll come back. Promise"

She knew, though, that nobody went into battle planning to die, and that she probably shouldn't have promised Dustin anything, but she had every intention of staying alive.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Chapter Eight

By the time Jessica got to the Byers' house, Nancy and Jonathan had already checked all the strands of Christmas lights to make sure they worked, and Jonathan had nailed the bear trap to the floor.

"Um, sorry, but what's with the lights again?"

"They flicker when it's around, or when Will is trying to communicate," Jonathan answered.

"Is that why there are letters painted on the wall?"

"Yeah. Mom painted them there. Put a light over each letter so –"

"So Will could spell things out," Jessica said, catching on. "Smart."

She remembered the first time she'd seen all the Christmas lights and the black paint on the wall, the day she and Nancy had come looking for Jonathan and he hadn't been there. She hadn't known what to think, that maybe Joyce had been cracking up. Jessica would have understood if that had been the case; her child was missing.

Now she knew what the lights and the paint were about and it all made sense – as long as you believed what was going on was real.

Nancy was in charge of the gun and was now loading it while Jonathan got to work on the baseball bat. He hammered the long nails into the edge of it so that the sharp ends stuck out. It was basically a manmade mace, something that probably hadn't been used as a weapon since the Middle Ages. Jessica liked it.

She also liked her machete, which at the moment was still in its sheath.

"Forgive me for being unrealistic, but I'm kind of hoping this thing just runs over the bear trap and we can shoot it and beat the crap out of it until it dies," Jessica said.

"That's . . . not a bad plan, actually," Jonathan said. "If we can lure it to the trap so that it triggers right . . ."

Jonathan showed them both of the places where most of the activity had happened – the living room, which had a hole that had been boarded up on the wall near the front door, and then Will's room.

"What happened to the wall?" Jessica asked.

"Mom. She saw Will there and tried to get to him, but I guess the gate had closed by the time . . . it was too late."

"That might mean the gateway could open there tonight."

"Maybe."

Jessica didn't know how to feel about that.

"Maybe . . . maybe Will is close and we can get him that way. Maybe the creature won't even come."

At some point, Jonathan had filled the gas can he'd bought with gasoline because Jessica was told to make a trail of it from the living room back towards the bedrooms. She poured a good amount around the trap that had been set. If the thing came, the plan was to lead it to Will's room, where the bear trap had been nailed to the floor in front of the door – and not trigger the trap on the way themselves. Jonathan, who had a lighter, would set the thing on fire and, if that didn't kill it, then Nancy would shoot it. If that didn't work, Jessica would chop it to pieces.

It sounded simple enough, but they knew it was going to be anything but.

Then, of course, there was the blood they needed to lure the creature there. They would each cut one palm so that they wouldn't have to lose much blood. Nancy had mentioned that when Barb had cut her hand it wasn't a big gash or anything, but the wound had been bad enough to have blood drip from it. A lot of blood wasn't needed.

When it came down to it, Nancy had to slice Jessica's hand because she couldn't do it on her own. It wasn't the blood and it wasn't the



pain, not by itself. She just had a thing against hurting herself.

After everything was set up and their wounds were bandaged, they had nothing to do but wait. It was almost one o'clock in the morning and nothing was happening. Maybe the thing really wasn't going to come.

They were all quiet, their weapons in front of them on the coffee table. Nancy's gun, Jonathan's bat, and Jessica's machete. Jessica saw Nancy sort of playing with Jonathan's hand once. She'd been rubbing her fingers over the bandage on his wounded hand. Jessica did not approve – even though Steve had seriously messed up, Nancy hadn't broken up with him, not clearly or officially, so she shouldn't have been playing with another boy's hands. Though to be fair . . . Steve shouldn't have been buying other girls milkshakes when he should have been trying to make things right with his girlfriend.

At around one-thirty somebody banged on the front door. It was Steve. Why was he banging on Jonathan's door at one-thirty in the morning? Why was he there at all?

"Jessica!" he called. "Open up!"

Jessica looked at Nancy and Jonathan and shrugged her shoulders. It was up to Jonathan whether or not Steve could come in, because it was his house, but she still needed to talk to Steve. He had to go. Jessica didn't want him there if that thing decided to show up.

"I got it," Nancy said and got up. She didn't seem upset that Steve was there, not for her but for Jessica.

"Maybe you shouldn't –" Jessica broke off and got up with her. Steve didn't know Nancy was there, and she didn't know how he knew *she* was there either, but she did know that the reason he'd done what he'd done was because of his jealousy about Nancy being around Jonathan.

He'd seen the wrongness of it, but what would he think if Nancy opened the door? They opened the door together, and Steve was surprised but not angry that Nancy was there. After all, what exactly could Nancy and Jonathan be doing while Jessica was there?

"Steve, you need to leave," Nancy said.

"I'm not trying to start anything, okay?"

"I don't care about that. You need to leave."

Steve's eyes focused on Nancy's hand then, the bandage and the small amount of blood that had seeped through. Jessica saw his brown eyes soften as concern filled them.

"Hey, what happened to your hand?" he asked, and grabbed it. "Is that blood? What's going on?"

"Nothing. It was an accident." Nancy drew her hand back.

"Wait a sec. Did he do this to you?"

Steve basically forced his way into the living room even though Nancy tried to stop him. Jessica didn't blame him – he thought Jonathan had hurt Nancy – but he stopped once he saw the letters on the wall and the Christmas lights strung everywhere.

"What is – what the –"

"You need to get out of here," Jonathan said, and grabbed Steve to move him back out the door.

"What is all this? What's that smell? Is that gasoline?"

"Look, I'm not asking you. I'm telling you, get outta here."

"Just wait!" Steve yelled. "I'm here for Jess."

That stopped the confrontation for a few seconds, and everyone looked her way.

"Why?" Then, "How did you know I was here?"

"Your mom called me fifteen minutes ago. Asked if you were with me. Told me you were supposed to call –"

"If I was gonna be out past midnight. Right. I . . . was busy."

Steve looked around the living room, spotted the weapons on the table and said, "What with exactly?"

She cringed inwardly. She had to tell him, but she didn't know how the other two would take it. She wouldn't just outright lie to him anymore. It would push him away.

"Steve, I can't leave. But you should. Remember what we talked about – about what happened last night? Well –"

Out of nowhere Nancy had the gun off the table and pointed at Steve.

"You need to leave," she shouted at Steve. "It's for your own good. You have five seconds."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Steve exclaimed. "What the hell, Nancy!"

Jessica moved in front of Steve and stared at Nancy. "Yeah. What the hell, Nancy?"

"We need him to leave."

"And if he doesn't, you're just gonna shoot him? Put the gun down."

As Jessica and Nancy argued back and forth, and Steve freaked out over the gun, the lights began flickering until they went out completely. Jonathan had to get their attention. Jessica stopped arguing first.

"It's here!" Jonathan said.

"What's here?" Steve asked.

Jonathan grabbed the bat, and Nancy pointed her gun at something that wasn't Steve. Jessica grabbed the machete off the table, pulled it from its sheath, and put the sheath back on the table.

"Jess?" Steve questioned, staring at the blade. "What are you doing?"

She looked at Nancy and shrugged. "Monster hunting."

The next minute or so was basically everyone turning in circles,

hoping the thing wouldn't catch them off guard. Except for Steve. He was just confused and freaking out – mostly about the weapons.

"Hello! Will someone please explain to me what the hell is going on?"

That was when the creature appeared. It came tearing through the roof, over the spot Joyce had axed through, and Nancy began shooting at it. It did no good. That part of the roof collapsed and the creature landed on the floor.

"Run!" Jonathan screamed, pushing Nancy's gun hand down since shooting the thing didn't seem to have any effect on it. "Go! Go! Go!"

They all ran down the hallway, Jessica grabbing Steve's arm on the way, and Jonathan reminding them to jump over the trap. That was mostly for Steve's benefit because he'd had no way of knowing it was there.

They ended up in Will's room like they'd planned, and Jonathan closed the door.

"What the hell was that?"

"Shut up!" Nancy and Jonathan screamed as Jonathan lit the lighter.

"It's the thing Nancy told you about," Jessica said breathlessly. "Do you believe her now?"

The lights began flickering again. There was no sound coming from the other side of the door, though, so they stayed put for a few minutes. What if the thing had gone back out the living room opening and was trying to circle around to the bedroom?

"What's it doing?" Nancy asked.

No one knew. The lights stopped flickering shortly after that. Maybe the creature had actually left, gone somewhere else. Why hadn't it just busted the door open? It probably could have, right?

Jessica basically fell onto Will's bed. She'd backed up far enough to have hit it with the backs of her knees and had lost her balance. It wasn't until that moment that she realized she was shaking and that

her heart was racing. What had she been thinking? Even though she had a weapon this time . . . this thing was still a monster from another dimension. What if their weapons hadn't worked against it? Maybe it had regenerative powers or something and couldn't be killed anyway.

"Is it gone?"

Jonathan was the one who checked. He opened the door, stepped out with the bat in position in case he needed it, and Nancy followed. Steve was next, and this time he had to grab Jessica to get her to follow. She did so, mechanically.

She was at the point where nothing that was happening or that had already happened felt real at all. The only thing that was grounding her at all was the machete in her right hand. She couldn't make a mistake with that. She could hurt herself or someone else.

She barely even felt Steve's hand on her arm, she just followed where he went.

Once in the living room again Jessica came back to herself a little bit, enough to notice the huge hole that the thing had torn into the roof.

"This is crazy! This is crazy! This is crazy! This is crazy!" Steve said, each exclamation getting louder, and then headed for the phone.

Nancy followed him and snatched the phone from his hand and smashed it on the floor.

"It's going to come back," Nancy said. "So you need to leave. Right. Now."

Jessica wanted to go home. She wanted to go pick Dustin up from the school and go home. But she couldn't go home, not if the government people were still after Dustin and his friends. Until this was over, she couldn't go home.

She couldn't go to *her* house, but . . . she could go to Steve's. They *all* could. She could leave – because, really, what good was she doing there? She could just go get the kids and take them to Steve's house. Nancy and Jonathan could stay and be heroes if they wanted to.

She'd made a promise to her brother that she would come back alive, and she desperately wanted to keep it.

The lights started flickering again, only this time it was worse because it would go completely dark for a few seconds before the lights would come back on. Everyone gathered in the center of the room, backs to each other. With the four of them watching out every corner of the room could be seen . . . until the lights went out again.

An animalistic growl filled the room and Jonathan was thrown to the floor, the bat flinging to the floor along with him, far enough away that he couldn't reach it. The creature wasted no time in climbing on top of him. It opened its mouth and a long stream of saliva fell into Jonathan's face. Or maybe it was some sort of paralyzing venom because Jonathan didn't seem able to move. Or maybe he'd hit his head. Either way, Jonathan was in trouble.

Nancy let loose with the gun, using every bullet in the thing, but the creature barely flinched. It just turned its attention to Nancy. The gun clicked as she continued pulling the trigger. She was out of ammo.

Jessica guessed that meant it was her turn. She wasn't sure how exactly she was supposed to use the machete. She'd only seen one used in movies when someone was trying to cut through tall grass or a jungle area. This was not that, so she ended up bringing the blade down like she would if she were trying to beat someone in the head with a club.

The blow landed on the demogorgan's shoulder and got stuck, so she lost her grip on the handle of the blade. She didn't think about it at the time, but she'd made a mistake when she'd decided to use the machete as a club rather than a blade; she'd left her entire midsection open to attack. The demogorgan swung at her, and she felt its claws tear across her belly

She screamed as it swung at her again, but she was quick enough to back away even if she did fall to her knees afterwards, and then Steve came out of nowhere with the nail-bat. He must have found it, wherever it had fallen.

Steve was . . . amazing! He hit the thing right in its stomach, which

made it move back a few steps towards the hallway. The blow actually seemed to have hurt it, so its belly was obviously a weak spot. If Nancy had shot it there, it probably would have done more than just flinch.

Steve hit it again, this time in the face – or the mouth, since it didn't seem to have a face – and it stumbled back again, this time right into the bear trap. It shrieked as its leg was bitten into by the metal teeth of the trap.

Without stopping to check that the creature was truly trapped, Steve dropped to where Jessica was still on her knees.

"Let me see," he said. He didn't wait for permission, he just moved her hands and lifted her shirt high enough to see the marks the creature had left.

"Steve –"

Jessica knew that it was bad, but not as bad as it could have been. There were four claw marks there, the skin open but blood wasn't gushing out of the wounds. It was, however, trickling out. It was enough to have leaked onto her shirt, but considering the alternative . . . she was lucky.

"He's stuck!" Jonathan said, up and moving again.

He quickly lit the lighter and threw it at the creature. Once the flame hit the spot around the trap they had doused with gasoline it caught fire. The walls were made of wood and the floor was carpeted, so the fire spread quickly. The only thing they could do now was contain the fire and wait for the thing to die.

The noises it was making were horrible, loud and screechy, but they only lasted for about a minute. Then there was the smell of burnt flesh. It was enough to make Jessica want to vomit.

Once they were sure the thing was dead, Jonathan went to the kitchen and came back with a fire extinguisher that had "Property of Hawkins Police" on it, white letters over red paint.

The smoke from the fire filled the hallway even after the flames had

been extinguished. Jessica pulled her shirt over her mouth and nose, and then she used Steve to help herself up even though he tried to keep her from moving too much. He was probably right. The wounds opened up more and she felt fresh blood trail down her skin towards her pants. She mostly ignored it. The marks burned more than anything else.

She began walking down the hall, and someone grabbed the back of her shirt. She looked back and saw that Steve had decided to follow her. She was completely okay with that. She *had* to see that this thing was dead or she would never believe that it was.

When she reached the bear trap all she saw was a big pile of slime where the thing had been, some inside the trap and a little on top of it, but there was nowhere near enough to have been the remains of the creature. There were no bones either – assuming bone would have been left over. And her machete had disappeared as well.

"Uh . . . where did it go?"

Taking a closer look, Jessica noticed that there was enough slime to have belonged to the one leg that had been trapped, but where had the rest of the creature gone? Was it really gone from there? Had it come to think of them as a threat? As far as Jessica knew, none of the others had hurt it. Will couldn't have, and Barb had been caught off guard. It had never had someone fight it, so it had never really come up against a human before.

The Christmas lights began blinking off and on, but it wasn't like before. This was more like one would come on and then the one after that, almost like they were leading them somewhere.

"Jonathan?" Jessica questioned. "What's going on?"

"It's . . . that's what Mom said happened when Will was talking to her – or trying to."

Steve's eyebrows shot up, as if he couldn't believe what Jonathan was saying. After what he'd just seen, hearing about Will speaking through lights shouldn't have come as too much of a shock.



The lights led them outside to a lamp post near the shed.

"Where's it going?" Nancy asked.

"I don't think that's the monster," Jonathan answered.

"I don't think it's the monster either. It feels different . . . like, non-threatening. Not scary."

Then the light stabilized and they were alone, outside on the porch. Jessica didn't know what they were going to do now. Just wait for that thing to come back? And what were they going to do if it did? Nothing seemed to hurt it for real. The thing had just disappeared after having been trapped and burned, and Steve couldn't fight the thing off with the nail-bat forever.

Speaking of Steve, she grabbed his arm, and he lowered the bat from the swinging position. Had he had it that way the whole time? She couldn't blame him if that were the case.

"The kids are at the school. I never should have left them there alone."

It occurred to her then that her mother would be worried about Dustin too. She probably would've called Mrs. Wheeler to see about whether or not Dustin was there. When she found out Dustin wasn't there and that Mike wasn't home either, she would have called Lucas's mom and then there really would've been a problem because Lucas wouldn't have been home either.

They were all going to be in so much trouble.

"You want to go get them?" Steve asked her.

"Yes."

He placed his hand on her back and turned her back towards the front door.

"Let me take care of you first. Your wounds didn't look too good."

---

Steve didn't know what was going on exactly but he did know that he wanted to get himself and Jessica away from the Byers' house.

He'd been asleep when Ms. Henderson had called him to tell him that Jessica wasn't home and that she hadn't called like she'd said she would. Mostly she just wanted to know whether or not Jessica was with him. Why she'd thought Jessica would be with him at one in the morning was still a mystery to him, but it had worried him to know that Jessica was out that late because she was *never* out that late. He'd agreed to check on her once he found out where she was and, sure enough, there she was at the Byers' house.

He'd wondered if this was the *something* that had come up that had made her decide to ditch him. If that was the case then *ouch* because she'd made the decision before he'd messed up earlier.

Then when he'd forced his way past Nancy and the door and taken in all the weapons and the smell of gasoline . . . he hadn't known what to think at first. He'd remembered his conversation with Jessica about the creature she, Jonathan, and Nancy had claimed to have seen, but he hadn't believed her. Sure, he'd believed they had seen *something*, but not whatever no-face thing Nancy and Jessica had described. And he hadn't believed they had gone after it, either, but after seeing the weapons . . .

Then the thing had appeared and he couldn't not believe, not when it was right there. Instinct had taken over then and they all ran down the hallway where a bear trap had been nailed to the floor. If Byers hadn't shouted for them to jump, Steve might have very well triggered it himself and that would have been it for him.

When the monster had disappeared the first time, Steve had hoped it was gone for good but no such luck. It had come back and attacked Jonathan.

Nancy had distracted it by shooting it, and Jessica had done the same by shoving her blade into the thing's shoulder. Steve had been frozen until he'd seen Jessica go down after having been clawed. Then all Steve could think about was protecting all of them. No matter how he felt about Byers, he didn't want him to die. So he picked up the bat and started swinging. He'd led it right to the bear trap, where it

snapped shut over the thing's leg. The howl it had let loose was unlike anything Steve had ever heard and he never wanted to hear it again. After Jonathan set the thing on fire, it didn't take long for them to think it had died.

It had only disappeared again, but this time they thought it was for good, at least for the night, and the lights had led them outside. Steve didn't know why or how, but he was just going with the flow at that point. They were still outside when Jessica said something about having to go get the others from the school. He didn't know what that was about either, but that didn't matter.

What mattered at the moment was that Jessica had been hurt and Steve needed to clean her wounds so they wouldn't get infected. Who knew what kind of germs that thing had been carrying?

"I need to call my mom," she said.

"Nancy smashed the phone," he reminded her.

"Right."

Jessica's eyes held some distance in them, as if she were shutting down. Steve knew it wasn't from blood loss because the wounds weren't that bad, so it had to be from shock. If he hadn't had something to focus on – helping Jess – he probably would have been going into shock himself.

Steve led Jess through the ruin of the living room to the couch. The first aid kit was already on the table – they must have used it when they'd cut their hands; he'd noticed that all three of them had matching bandages on their right hands.

"What's with the hands?"

"We lured it here with our blood."

Steve didn't say anything to that because the only thing he could think was that they had been extremely stupid in doing what they had done. He just made sure Jessica was as comfortable as she could be and went to get some warm water and a clean washcloth.

Jessica's work shirt was torn to shreds over the spot where the thing had taken a swipe at her, but she kept it on and just held it up for him when he began cleaning her off. Steve noticed that she stopped breathing as the water touched her wounds – it probably stung. They really needed some peroxide or something because he didn't know if just water was going to cut it.

"Jess? You have to breathe."

He stopped until she calmed down. He wanted to turn away when he noticed the tears in her eyes. He felt awful because he was the one causing it at the moment.

"Hurts," she said. She sounded pitiful.

"I know, but you can do it. You took that thing on with a machete. That's kind of a big deal."

Jessica tried to smile but grimaced instead. "It stings . . . the water."

"I'll try to be gentler."

The wounds were red and angry and the skin was almost puckered where it had been torn, and she really needed a doctor. He told her that as he wrapped a bandage around her middle. He thought she needed better anti-bacteria than they had there.

"I have to go to the school," she said. "I promised Dustin I'd come back."

"Well, let me come with you," he said.

"You should stay with Nancy."

"I think Nancy's okay on her own. I mean . . . with Byers."

Jessica looked towards the front door, where Nancy and Jonathan were still standing outside on the porch. They weren't doing anything inappropriate or anything, but Steve noticed that Nancy seemed more comfortable with Jonathan than she ever had with him.

Steve took her bandaged hand, careful not to hurt her, and said, "Let's

go. You can't drive right now, anyway."

So Jessica grabbed her jacket, which Steve had to help her put on, and they went. They took Steve's car. He'd bring her back to get hers later. Jonathan and Nancy stayed behind because Hopper and Joyce were supposed to come back with Will, which . . . Steve didn't understand that either, because Will was supposed to be dead.

"I'll explain everything on the way," Jessica said. "You're part of it now, so I guess you can know."

They took off, Steve wondering why he couldn't have known to begin with.

---

Jessica started from the beginning, which was the disappearance of Will Byers, and then explained about finding El when she'd discovered Dustin, Mike, and Lucas out in the woods looking for Will. She even told him about El's powers and that government people were looking for her, which meant they were also looking for whoever was helping her.

"That's why I didn't tell you," Jessica said. "Or part of the reason. I didn't want you to be in danger. Also why I waited so long to tell you about that thing."

"I still don't understand about Will."

"He's . . . That thing isn't from here. This is the weirdest part. There are rifts in the universe, where that thing can get through. It leads to another dimension. We call it the Upside Down. Everything is dark over there, and ashy."

Jessica ran a finger over one of the nails in the bat Steve had used earlier. She didn't know if he'd meant to, but he'd brought it with him, and she'd been holding it the whole time they'd been in the car.

"But the police found Will's body," Steve said.

"It wasn't Will. According to Hopper, it wasn't even a real body. It was a stuffed mannequin or something. I mean, whoever is covering this up is going to some serious extremes. Whoever it is works with

the Department of Energy."

The rest of the story Steve basically knew, so she skipped it. She spent the rest of the ride to the school playing with the bat and trying not to let the fight get to her. The thing was still out there, though, and she didn't feel safe at all. There was no way to tell when or where that thing would appear because there was no way to tell when a rift would appear. Sure, blood could lure it, but from what she knew blood hadn't been in the picture when Will had been taken, so blood didn't have to be a factor.

On the way to the school, Steve had been very careful not to hit too many bumps, and Jessica was grateful, but he couldn't not hit the speed bump that ran across the entrance to the school parking lot. Crazy fact about the middle and high schools in Hawkins is that they were right across the street from each other. The middle school parking lot was mostly just a dirt road that led to a field, whereas the high school parking lot was actually asphalt. They went into the high school parking lot because that's where everyone else was. It was a nightmare. They'd seen the police car lights before they reached the school, and if Dustin hadn't been waiting for her she would have told Steve to turn back around. But there were ambulances there too, so what if one of her boys was hurt – or El.

As it was, she held her stomach and cursed as the bounce from the speed bump shook her. Steve had been going as slow as he could, but it still hurt. He cursed too and apologized as he looked her way.

"I'm okay."

"Okay. What is going on here?" Steve wondered out loud.

"I don't know. You should go, though. Just drop me off."

"No way."

"Steve –"

"No. You said I'm part of this, so let me be a part of it."

"Fine. Just . . . don't tell Dustin about what happened. Okay?"

He agreed and then parked in a free spot. They got out of the car together, Jessica more slowly, of course. She was surprised at how much it hurt just to stand up straight, and she imagined she might have caused her wounds to bleed again, assuming they had ever stopped.

"You really should see a doctor," Steve said. "You might need stitches or something."

She shook her head and began looking for Dustin through the crowd of cops. She didn't find him, but she found Mike easily enough, though, because he was seated in the back of an ambulance. His mother was there with him, so that proved that their parents had been called. Mr. Wheeler was close by. Her own mother was probably there somewhere too, with Dustin, unless she'd already come and gone.

"Mike," she said when she reached him. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I . . . banged my head."

Mrs. Wheeler looked at her then. "Will you stay with him for a minute? I need to talk to the EMT."

Jessica nodded, and Mrs. Wheeler stepped away toward the EMT. Her husband was there too.

"What happened?" she asked.

Mike seemed more upset than he would be if he'd just hit his head.

"Uh –" he glanced at Steve.

"I told him. He showed up tonight, so I kinda had to."

"El is gone," Mike said, and that was all he said.

"Gone?"

Had the 'bad men' gotten to her? After everything, had they failed to protect her? Well, Hopper was a part of this now, so maybe he could tell someone higher up and they could get El back and maybe even

shut down the whole organization. But then she noticed that Mike was fighting back tears and she knew that El wasn't just gone. She was dead.

"Mike? What happened?"

"The demogorgan came."

Oh God. It had left them to come to the school. She never should have left them alone.

Mike told her about the government people coming to the school and trapping them in the hallway. El had taken care of them, though. She'd . . . killed them, and then the creature had been drawn to them because of the blood. She vaguely wondered how El had caused the people to bleed and then realized she didn't really want to know. It didn't matter anyway. El had been protecting herself and the others, so she'd done what she'd had to, and the hallways in the building were basically a blood bath.

El had done something to the creature when it cornered them in a classroom and it had turned to ash. She had disappeared with it.

Mike had been closer to El than anyone else, but Jessica still felt a sense of loss even after the few days she'd known El. She would have liked to see El free to grow and blossom as a free girl. She would have liked to see her make friends – Jessica would have liked to have *been* her friend.

"Mike, I'm sorry."

She wanted to hug him but didn't know if he'd accept it.

"Where are the others?"

"Lucas's parents took him home already. Your mom showed up a few minutes before you did. Dustin's talking to one of Hopper's officers."

"What exactly is he saying?"

"The truth mostly. Sensory deprivation and all that. It was an experiment."



"Okay. Well, I'm gonna go find him once your mom comes back." She touched his shoulder, hoping to bring him comfort. "Help anytime, remember?"

He nodded once. "Nancy?"

"She's fine. She's still at the Byers' house waiting for Joyce and Hopper to come back."

Jessica did as she'd said she was going to and waited for Mrs. Wheeler to come back before going to look for her brother. She found Dustin a few minutes later talking to an officer like Mike said he would be. The cop didn't seem to know what was going on and they couldn't tell him without the go-ahead from Hopper.

"Dustin!" she shouted for him and quickly went to him when he saw her. She learned that both of those things were not good to do with cuts on her stomach. She almost cursed again, but she didn't want Steve or Dustin to know how much she was hurting. Steve would probably tell her she needed a doctor.

She hugged Dustin, and her mom too when she saw her. That hurt too, but she dealt with it. She apologized to her mom for not calling. She wasn't lying when she said she'd forgotten.

"Never mind. What happened to your hand? Every time you hang out with Nancy and Jonathan, you come home dirty or hurt."

Her mom couldn't tell exactly how hurt she was because her jacket was zipped up, covering her torn shirt and bandaged belly. It covered the blood too.

"I'm fine. I cut my hand."

"It bled through the bandage. Maybe you need stitches."

"I'm fine."

"The EMT is back over there," Steve said, pointing back the way they had just come from. He gave her a pointed look, so she glared at him. He wasn't helping the situation at all.

"Hush."

All in all, they were there for over an hour, meaning it was almost four in the morning. Whatever had been keeping Jessica awake and alert had almost completely left her system and she felt as if she could just fall down and sleep where she stood. She didn't know why they couldn't just go to the station the next day and give their statements then. It was so late.

But it wasn't like they could go home anyway. Jessica didn't know if they were off the hook just yet.

Hopper showed up and pretty much broke everything up a little after four. The medical people had already left, but the crime scene crew were still inside, coming and going with the bodies of the government people.

Nancy was with Hopper when he arrived, and they pulled Dustin and Jessica away from the others.

"Where's Joyce?" Jessica asked. "And Jonathan."

"She's fine. She's at the hospital. We found Will. He's gonna be okay."

Jessica let out a breath of relief she hadn't even known she'd been holding – she may have been holding it all week. She grabbed onto Dustin – or maybe he grabbed onto her. Either way, they were holding onto each other, and Dustin was grinning while Jessica was grimacing. She'd been trying to grin, but . . . Her wounds were the kind that she couldn't even feel them until she moved wrong and then the pain came back, stronger each time it felt like. But that didn't matter. Will had been found and was going to be okay.

"Mike! Mike!" Dustin pulled away to go find his friend. "They found Will!"

Jessica turned to go back to her mom, and to Steve, who had been so strong for her when he had to have been freaking out, and so patient with her the past few hours, but was stopped by Hopper grabbing her wounded hand.

She jerked away because even though he hadn't grabbed her roughly

at all, it still hurt. And pulling her hand away had jarred her other injuries more than anything else had that night. It was even worse than the stupid speed bump they'd gone over coming into the parking lot. She ended up slumped over, clutching her belly with both hands.

"What's wrong? What happened to your hand?"

"Nothing, I cut it."

"Uh-huh. Like Nancy cut hers, and Jonathan?"

"Well . . . yeah."

"Cut the crap. I know you guys lured that thing to the house. You all could have been killed."

"But we weren't, so . . ."

Hopper looked as if she'd just plucked his last nerve, so she gave him a very sheepish smile.

"Sorry. I know it was stupid, but you guys were looking for Will, and no other adults knew about it – or none that would help."

Hopper ran a hand over his face, seeming exhausted, and she felt a sudden surge of affection for the older man. He'd actually given them all a chance and hadn't just written them all off as crazy, and he'd helped get Will back. He had a right and a reason to be tired.

"Just . . . go to the hospital. Get someone to look at your hand. Make sure Nancy and Jonathan do the same."

"Okay."

"Nancy told me what happened with the . . . thing. How it got you. Get that checked too." Hopper looked around at all the chaos. "I've gotta stay here and get the story straight, but I'll be there soon. We've all gotta talk. Don't leave the hospital until I get there. Got it?"

"Yeah. I'll play watch dog, but, uh . . . Lucas went home already."

"He's already at the hospital. We got him right as they turned into the

driveway."

"Okay. Is it safe for my mom to go home? She doesn't know anything."

"She'll be fine. That's . . . you're safe. That's what we need to talk about." He pointed at Steve. "What's Harrington doing here? Isn't he the one that was causing all the problems earlier?"

Jessica explained what had happened earlier and how Steve had basically saved their lives.

"So, he knows everything?"

"Basically."

"A'right. Get him to drive you guys to the hospital. Don't tell anyone else. And wait for me there."

She nodded, but then, "Are we in trouble?"

"No." He patted her shoulder. "Now go get yourself checked out."

## 9. Chapter 9

### Chapter Nine

Mrs. Wheeler drove Nancy and Mike to the hospital while Steve took Dustin and Jessica. Their mother would have taken them, but Hopper convinced her that Steve could handle it. Besides, she thought that only Jessica's hand was wounded.

It was a little after five when they reached the hospital. They immediately sought out Joyce and Jonathan, who were in Will's room. A nurse told them Chief Hopper had called ahead. Jonathan had already been checked out, but the nurse led Nancy and Jessica to separate rooms to check them out. The wounds on their hands didn't even need stitches. Nancy was free to go. Jessica, on the other hand, had to stay a few extra minutes.

Because Hopper had called it in, she got to a doctor fairly quickly, a man in his mid-to-late thirties with already graying hair. He took the original bandage off so he could see the damage that had been done.

"Chief said some kind of animal got you?"

"Something did," she said vaguely.

"Hm. What did you clean it with?"

"Water. We didn't have anything else."

"Well, fortunately, we do. It's going to sting, a lot, but it will keep these from getting infected. And trust me, left untreated, these will get infected. They're on their way there already."

"So treat them then," she snapped and immediately felt bad for the attitude even though the doctor didn't seem to be offended at all. He probably dealt with bad patients all the time. She'd been awake for over twenty hours and that day had been a roller coaster of emotions. She was done.

The doctor hadn't been lying when he'd told her that it was going to sting when he cleaned her wounds. She had to bite her lip to keep

from crying out once or twice.

"You couldn't have picked a worse place to get hurt," the doctor said. "You'll have to take it easy for about a week. Any sudden movement and you could reopen the wounds. Looks like you've already done that once or twice."

"Yeah. Hit a speed bump."

"A'right. I'm gonna prescribe the ointment I used. Apply it twice a day. I'll prescribe a minor pain killer, because you are going to hurt more after sleeping then you do right now. The cuts are inflamed, but the ointment should take care of that in a few days. If it doesn't, you need to come back. Okay? If you start running a fever or get sick while the cuts are still inflamed, you need to come back immediately because it could be a sign that infection has set in."

"Okay."

"Now, the wounds are mostly superficial. They could've been a lot worse, and you don't need stitches. They seem to be closing fine on their own. If you have any scarring at all it will be minor."

Once the doctor put a new bandage around her middle, Jessica was free to go with instructions to make a stop at the hospital pharmacy before leaving. She told him she'd need a written excuse to be out of work for however long she'd need to heal, and the doctor gave her one without hesitation. She found Dustin and Steve outside the room they'd been keeping her in and she felt a sudden need to cry but she was just too tired to let tears come.

"You've got a battle scar," Dustin said and pointed at her belly.

"Steve!"

"What? He was gonna find out anyway. He wanted to know why they kept you so much longer than they did Nancy."

"Oh . . . Right." To Dustin she said, "You've gotta help me keep this from Mom, okay? I wouldn't know what to say if she saw the marks."

Dustin nodded. "Sure."

It wasn't too long after that that a nurse came up to them and pointed at Steve. "Your turn. The Chief said to take a look at your face."

"I'm fine," Steve said.

"Steve," Jessica said. "Go. You might have a concussion or something."

The look Steve gave her then was full of exasperation, but he went anyway. All they did was clean his wounds, which he said hurt worse than the wounds themselves. Jessica knew that all too well.

---

They found the waiting room closest to Will's room, where Mrs. Wheeler, Nancy, Mike, and Lucas were already seated. Lucas's mom had dropped him off with Mrs. Wheeler because Lucas had a little sister and she didn't want her catching anything from the hospital.

"Anybody hear anything?" Jessica asked, gingerly sitting down in the middle one of three empty chairs.

"Will's still sleeping," Mike said. "Mrs. Byers said something about maybe having to transfer him. It depends on how well he responds to treatment here."

"Hopper said he was gonna be fine."

"Hopper's not a doctor," Lucas, ever the voice of reason, said.

He wasn't wrong.

Hopper showed up a little after sunrise. They still hadn't been able to see Will, but he had woken up, so that was progress.

Jessica had dozed off against Steve's shoulder – he was on one side of her and Dustin was on the other – but woke right up when Hopper came in. Her head felt like it was floating, but she was alert enough. She hadn't even gone to get her medicine yet; she was just foggy from being tired.

"I need to talk to everyone involved," he said. "This isn't an interrogation, Mrs. Wheeler, so you can stay here. We'll talk right out

in the hallway."

Once they were out in the hallway, they stood in a circle, Hopper in the center of them.

"Okay, Joyce and Jonathan already know this, but the only reason we were able to get Will back was because we made a deal."

"A deal?"

"We agreed that we would never mention the lab or what they were doing to anyone in exchange for everything we needed to get Will back. We needed the equipment to be able to survive . . . over there. We said we would forget it ever happened – all of it. It *never* happened. You guys never found Eleven. Will got lost in the woods, and we'll figure the rest out later."

"So . . . our safety for our silence basically?" Nancy asked. "What about Barb? She didn't get to come back, so how do you explain her?"

"I'm sorry, Nancy. She ran away." Hopper did sound sorry. "Her car was found at the airport."

"She's not old enough to buy a plane ticket on her own."

"There are ways, Nancy."

Nancy clenched her jaw shut and tears filled her eyes. Jessica was surprised when Steve didn't go to her side; he stayed with *her*. She would have mentioned it, but Jonathan came to get them then to let them know that they could go see Will.

Hopper nodded, so Mike, Dustin, and Lucas took off running in the direction of Will's room. Jessica followed more slowly, and when she got there all three of the boys were on top of Will, hugging him.

"Be careful," Joyce exclaimed. "Be careful with him."

"Yeah, take it easy," Jonathan added, but Jessica could tell they were both extremely happy that Will was back and that his friends were there.



"You won't believe what happened while you were gone, man!" Lucas said.

"It was mental."

"You had a funeral."

"Jennifer Hayes was crying, and Troy peed himself."

"What?"

"In front of the whole school."

"Yes!"

Will started coughing and the mood in the room came down quickly. He may have been okay, but he had miles to go before he would be completely healthy. There were dark rings around his eyes and he was pale – his lips even had a blue tint to them.

"You okay?" Mike asked him.

"It got me," Will said after catching his breath. "The demogorgan."

"We know. But it's okay. It's dead – we made a new friend. She stopped it. She saved us, but she's gone now."

"Her name's Eleven," Dustin said.

"Like the number?"

"Well, we call her El, for short."

"She's basically a wizard."

"She has super powers."

"More like a Yoda," Mike said.

"She flipped a van with her mind. And these guys were after us and she squeezed their brains out."

Jessica had to admit that she would have loved to have seen the van

flip, but she was glad she'd missed the brain-squeezing thing, especially when she heard Dustin say that blood had poured out of their faces, out of their eyes. Well, she'd wanted to know what had happened that had caused all the blood and now she knew.

"Agents started grabbing us, and –"

Jessica tuned out when she felt a presence behind her. She knew it was Steve and leaned back against him when he was close enough. She was so tired.

"You should be with Nancy. She's upset."

"Well, I'm with you."

He slowly and gently wrapped one arm around her waist and she tensed for a brief second, feeling guilty, before deciding to just go with it.

"Still need to tell Nancy."

"I will. And apologize to Jonathan . . . for everything."

"Hm." She grabbed his arm with her undamaged hand. "You're learning."

---

Steve did talk to Nancy and Jonathan. Jessica was taking her turn with Will, so it seemed like the perfect time.

"Look, I want to apologize to both of you for everything. What I said to you," he said to Byers. Then to Nancy, "What I did to you and what I let Tommy and Carol do. I'm sorry."

Jonathan took the apology pretty well – he'd accepted it more easily than Steve thought he would have, though that could have been because he was worried about getting back to Will. Steve would take it, even if he had to do more later. For now, it was enough.

Nancy stayed behind when Jonathan left.

"That was a crappy thing you did earlier," she said.

"I know, I – there's no excuse."

And there really wasn't. No matter what Nancy had or hadn't done, he never should have allowed Tommy to paint those words anywhere.

"I messed up," he said, "so much with you."

"Yeah. It probably started when you decided to date *me* when you're actually in love with Jessica."

"What?"

Nancy smiled gently. She wasn't angry with him. She actually seemed pretty understanding.

"I get it," she said. "You've been friends with her almost from the day she moved here."

"But . . . Nancy –"

He wasn't going to deny it, but he guessed he needed to apologize for that too.

"I *do* care about you."

"I know. But you care about Jessica more, and it's okay. She's a great girl."

"Yeah, she is." He shook his head once, brown hair falling over one of his eyes. "How did you know? About . . ."

She gave him a slightly coy smile. "A girl always knows."

"Oh, really?"

"Mm-hm." Then more seriously, "Yesterday morning you seemed to care more about what Jessica thought than what I did about what you did. And . . . I mean, you went out at one-thirty in the morning looking for her when her mom called you because she hadn't come home. Um . . . you were more worried about her last night than you were about me. You left with her when you could've chosen to stay

with me . . . But I think I knew before that. The day you asked us all to come over and she couldn't . . . your face sort of . . . fell when you found out she wasn't coming. You almost begged her to come."

Steve let his eyes drift. He hadn't realized he'd done that. He remembered feeling disappointed, but that was only because he'd wanted to spend time with Jessica outside of school and he hadn't been able to.

"Nancy, I –"

"You need to go back to Jessica. Just . . . it's okay. Really. I'm not mad."

Steve embraced her briefly and apologized again. He hoped she knew everything his apology encompassed. He hadn't realized it at the time, but from the start he'd subtly pressured Nancy to do things she normally wouldn't have. She let him sneak into her room; she drank at the party, had sex with him there.

He'd hinted that she didn't need to study because she already had a close-to-perfect GPA, so what was one bad test score? Though, to be fair, he really had helped her study that night in her room and he hadn't gotten mad when she'd said no when he'd tried to seduce her. He'd been disappointed, sure, but not upset. Nancy had probably noticed, but he couldn't help that.

At the party, though, Nancy had decided to drink only because of his telling her that it was impressive. She hadn't even gotten a little tipsy, but still . . . he was sure it had been her first drink. He hadn't really cared whether she had a beer or not, but given the crowd she'd been hanging around . . . she'd given in.

That was also the night Nancy slept with him, the first time she'd had sex with anyone. Whether or not she'd felt pressured into it or not Steve didn't know, but she'd definitely felt guilty about it the next day. She'd felt like everyone was watching her. What if she'd thought he'd told everyone? He hadn't, but he had done something worse when he'd thought she'd slept with Byers.

He'd been a pretty crappy boyfriend. Jealous and insecure, the last of

which he didn't want anyone knowing. He was King Steve. He couldn't be insecure; it wasn't allowed. He wasn't actually supposed to care about anyone, especially not about some girl he'd slept with – and definitely not about a girl he *wasn't* sleeping with.

But he did. He cared about Nancy, maybe not in the way he should have, not in the way he wanted to, not in the way that meant he could get over Jessica – because, really, she'd never shown any real interest in him – but he did care.

There was a lot of Jessica in Nancy – maybe that was what had drawn him to her, he didn't know. They were both kind, and neither one of them were like the girls he'd only had fun with because neither of them wanted to just have fun. They both cared about others – genuinely cared and didn't care what anyone thought about it. That may have triggered Steve's jealousy, and he'd have to work on that.

"Go back to Jess," Nancy said, touched his arm briefly, and went back to the waiting room.

---

Jessica was still in Will's room when Steve returned. Jonathan was there as well as Joyce and Hopper, but the boys were waiting out in the hallway.

Steve didn't really know Will, so he stayed outside as well. He didn't know Lucas Sinclair at all, really, and he only knew Mike because of Nancy. They'd never really even said anything to each other. Mike had caught him sneaking into Nancy's room, but Mike had been sneaking out of the house. Dustin, though . . . he knew him, and they had spoken to each other – mostly just the basic "hey" and "what's up?" in passing when Steve had visited Jessica at her house.

It was Dustin and only Dustin, who talked to him, and that was only to say, "Thanks for protecting my sister. Maybe you're not as much of a douche bag as people say you are."

That was it, that was all he said. Steve didn't know if he should take it as an insult or a compliment because it had kind of been both.

---

After visiting with Will for a few minutes Jessica went out into the hallway where the kids and Steve were.

"Dustin, go say goodbye to Will. Okay? We can come back later, after we sleep."

Dustin didn't complain and did as she said. She leaned against the wall and sighed.

"I still need to go get my car from the Byers' house." She rubbed her hands over her face to wake herself up a little. "I'm so tired."

Steve moved from his spot to lean beside her, shoulder on the wall so he could face her. She turned her head towards him.

"I'll take you home, and you can go get it later. After you sleep, like you said."

That was true. Steve would take her, or her mom would. Jonathan probably wouldn't mind bringing it to her if all else failed.

Dustin came back out and Jessica went to the pharmacy like the doctor had told her to. The pharmacist tried to give her a hard time about the pain pills because she wasn't an adult, and she was just too tired to deal with that, so she mentioned Hopper's name and all was well.

Steve led them to the parking lot and to his car, where Dustin hopped in the backseat and Jessica slid into the front. They'd barely made it to the road before Dustin had fallen asleep.

"Man . . . what a day."

"You're tellin' me."

They were both silent for a few minutes, and Jessica looked back at her brother. His head was propped up against the window, mouth slightly open.

"Try not to hit any bumps," she said. "I don't want him hitting his head."

"And I don't want you reopening your wounds. I'll be careful."

For the first time since arriving at Jonathan's house the night before, Jessica felt like she could breathe, which also meant it was the first time she could actually process everything that had happened.

First and foremost, they had survived against the monster, the demogorgan. No, they hadn't been the ones to kill it, but . . . they'd fought it and walked away alive. Steve had a lot to do with that.

Will was alive and going to be okay. Sure, he needed time to recover completely, but he was back, and the thing that had taken him was gone. Dead. It couldn't take or hurt anyone again.

El was gone, though. She'd sacrificed herself and done what Jessica and the others hadn't been able to do: Kill the demogorgan.

They weren't allowed to talk about any of it to an outsider. People had died, and people had disappeared because of what was going on at Hawkins Lab – the experimentation on people, and the problems that had come from that.

If they wanted to remain safe from the lab people, they had to agree not to say a word about what had happened. They had become part of a government cover-up. Not everybody could say that.

She didn't stop thinking until they were in her driveway. Her house wasn't far from the hospital, but it had taken longer because of Steve's careful driving. Jessica didn't know when, but Steve had grabbed her hand at some point – or maybe she'd grabbed his, she didn't know – and she was squeezing his like someone would squeeze a stress ball. Squeeze, release, squeeze, release, over and over like that. He let her.

"Thanks for bringing us home. I'm sorry you got dragged into all this."

"We're best friends. I'd be offended if I hadn't been dragged into this."

She allowed herself to smile at that, but only for a second. She was so tired she felt she couldn't do anything for more than a second. She didn't know how she was going to make it to the front door. Maybe they could all just sleep in the car.

"Maybe you should stay here," she told Steve. "I don't want you going home alone. We don't actually *know* that we're safe, and you – you should just stay."

None of them needed to be alone even if the question of safety wasn't an issue. They didn't need to be alone because of what had just happened in case they needed to talk or just needed to be around someone who knew what they were going through.

Will had Joyce and Jonathan; Mike and Nancy had each other; Lucas could talk to Mike on the walkie-talkie; she and Dustin lived together; Steve was the only one who didn't have someone waiting at home.

"I guess I can crash on the couch," Steve said.

"Good."

Jessica woke Dustin up as gently as she could, and they made their way into the house. Their mother was in the living room, sitting up on the couch, half-asleep with her head nodding down toward her chest. She'd stayed up to wait for them.

"Hey," Jessica said in way of greeting, too tired to say anything other than that. "Steve's staying over since it's so late. I don't want him crashing on the way home."

"Of course."

Jessica felt sort of bad for *telling* her mother rather than asking, but she chalked it up to her being tired. She wasn't usually so demanding of people older than herself. She had a healthy enough amount of respect for authority that she didn't try to order adults around.

Dustin had barely said a word to their mom other than "hi" and "good night". No one blamed him. The sun had been up for a good hour or so, and he was exhausted.

Jessica stayed with Steve for a few minutes even after her mom went to bed. Jessica found a blanket and a pillow for Steve to use and let him get set up. He knew where everything was, and even though she was hurt she felt better getting the stuff for him. She didn't question why. She was too tired to care.



"You need anything else?" she asked.

"Nope. Think I'm set."

"Mm. Wish you didn't have to sleep on the couch."

Their guest room had never really been a guest room. It was more a storage space for a lot of junk they probably should've gotten rid of a long time ago.

"I'm okay. If I need anything, I know where it is. I can get it."

"Great. I'm getting up around noon. Do you want me to wake you up?"

He said yes, and she went to her room, changed her clothes, set her alarm, and got in bed. She had no problem going to sleep.

---

Jessica did come down to wake up Steve at noon, but he heard her coming. He was usually a deep sleeper, but not that day. He kept going over the fight at the Byers' house. He couldn't not see whatever that thing had been.

Last night could have gone a lot worse than it had. One of them could have gotten killed, and now they were all part of this government conspiracy that they were supposed to forget ever happened.

He was surprisingly okay with that. He did want to forget about it. He wished he *could*, but he'd never been so afraid in his life as he'd been the night before. Nothing else had ever made him have trouble sleeping either, but that monster had.

"You want food?" Jessica asked as she went by him and into the kitchen. "Eggs and toast."

"Sure," he said – more like mumbled – and got up too. He was still in his jeans and sweater, though he'd taken his shoes off before trying to sleep. "Are you sure you should be cooking?"

"I'm okay."

Steve stood in the entrance of the kitchen and watched as she pulled a pan out of a cabinet only to place it on the stove. He noticed the grimace on her face since she'd had to stretch to get into the cabinet. Why hadn't she just asked for help?

Jessica got the eggs out of the fridge, along with a carton of milk, and placed them on the counter by the stove. The salt and pepper shakers she got from the kitchen table, and a bowl from another cabinet.

She had trouble cracking the eggs because of the cut on her hand, but she still didn't ask for help because she was stubborn. And there was no way she was going to be able to stand there and scramble the eggs up without jarring the cuts on her belly, so Steve stepped forward.

"A'right, tough girl. I've got the eggs," he said. "You do the toast, and I'll get the plates down. You don't need to stretch anymore."

She seemed relieved. "Okay. Don't forget to add the milk so the eggs get fluffy."

"Fluffy?"

"Yeah, you know, like your hair."

"My hair is not fluffy. It's perfect."

She shrugged. "It can be fluffy and perfect at the same time. Now hush and make the eggs. Just do the whole dozen. I'm gonna get Mom and Dustin up too."

She made her way to the archway of the kitchen entrance and sent him an almost guilty expression.

"What?"

"My medicine is still in your car. I left it in there when we got here because I didn't know how to explain it to Mom. I'm gonna go get it before I wake her up. I don't know how I react to pain meds, so if I start getting loopy or something . . ."

"Got it."

Steve had gotten four plates down by the time Jessica came back from getting her meds, and she set the table, turned the coffee pot on, and put the milk on the table once Steve was done with it.

She dry-swallowed one of her pills after reading the warning label and said, "I'm gonna go hide this in my room," meaning the pharmacy bag with her cream and pills.

By the time she'd woken both her mom and her brother up, the eggs were almost done so she made the toast, enough for everyone to have two pieces. Butter and jelly containers were put on the table on either side of the plate of toast, along with a knife for both.

Steve wasn't used to family meals, and the ones he had been part of with his family had been full of awkward silence – or tense silence, which was worse – and any conversation that did happen had been stilted.

Not so with the Henderson's. That particular morning, they were quiet because they were all tired, but the silence and the vibe was nowhere close to awkward. Ms. Henderson seemed grateful that she hadn't had to make breakfast – or lunch, since it was after noon now. Dustin was still half-asleep even as he spread butter over his toast. Jessica was smiling fondly at her brother.

They were a family. Nothing stilted about them.

"Can we go see Will again today?" Dustin asked once he'd woken up a bit more. "I'm not gonna be able to see him much during the week because of school."

"We can go once I get my car back," Jessica said. "Right, Mom?"

"Sure. As long as you guys finish your homework."

That's when Steve remembered that Jessica had missed the last two days of the school week. Her brother obviously had too.

Steve wondered how exactly everything was going to be covered up. Will – or something people thought had been Will – had been buried. There had been a funeral for him, and they couldn't just say they'd buried a dummy look-alike.

But that really wasn't his problem, and he could let someone else figure it out.

---

Dustin ended up doing the dishes, which was pretty normal when someone actually cooked a meal. Usually Jessica helped, but she didn't this time because of the bandage on her wounded hand. It got even more in the way when she had to shower, and she just ended up taking the bandages off of her hand and midsection. She would put new ones on after she got out. The whole point of the bandages was to keep the wound clean anyway, and what better way to clean it was there than to take a shower?

The soap and shampoo stung her cuts, but it wasn't as bad as the day before. The wounds mostly just felt tight and stiff. She hadn't reopened them by stretching earlier, though, so she wasn't going to complain.

Once clean, she stepped out of the tub, wrapped herself and her hair in a towel. Her mom kept all her medical stuff in the bathroom cabinet, so she got her gauze from there. She basically ran to her room so she could clean her wounds and rebandage them. She placed everything on her dresser and then slipped some loose, comfortable clothes on. She opened her underwear drawer and pulled out the anti-bacteria cream and placed it with the gauze.

"Bathroom's free!" she yelled to whoever wanted to shower next – probably Dustin because Steve didn't have clothes there.

In fact, once she was done she was going to tell Steve that they could drive to his house first before going to get her car. He probably wanted to shower and change. She'd felt grimy from the day before, and he probably did too.

She caught Dustin before he went into the bathroom and said, "Hey, I'm gonna go with Steve to his house real quick, but I'll come back and get you so we can go visit Will. Bring any homework you have with you, so you have something to do if he's sleeping."

Dustin agreed and went to take his shower.

"Steve!" she called out. "Can you come up here for a minute?"

She heard his quiet footsteps on the stairs and grabbed the cream and gauze. Steve stopped at her doorway and looked at her, an eyebrow raised.

"Yeah?"

"I – I need your help. I can clean the wounds myself, but I won't be able to see to put the bandage back on. And it's gonna be really hard to wrap my hand back up myself."

Steve stepped inside the room and went to her even as she continued rambling.

"Mom doesn't know, so she can't see what happened. And I'm not asking Dustin to do it because he's my brother, and –"

Steve shook his head, amusement all over his face, before he grabbed the hand with the gauze in it.

"You're so cute when you babble."

That more than anything made Jessica stop short. For a few brief seconds she felt like air wasn't getting into her system right, and her face became hot. She wasn't even aware of Steve taking the gauze from her hands and leading her to the bed so she could sit. She only snapped out of it when Steve handed her the tube of anti-bacteria cream.

"You okay?"

"You called me cute," she said, as if he hadn't been there when he'd done it. "You called me cute."

Steve grinned and shrugged. "So? You're standing there in loose clothing and wet hair, trying to think of reason why you shouldn't ask for help while also asking for it. You're cute."

Surprisingly it wasn't awkward at all when she lifted her shirt up and held it there for Steve to wrap the bandages around her – maybe because he'd already done it the night before, she didn't know, but

even after his comment she felt completely comfortable having him do this for her, and he seemed comfortable doing it for her.

---

On the way to Steve's house, Jessica's mind wandered briefly – it wasn't that long of a drive. She thought about how everything looked so normal. The sun was shining, the sky was blue with little puffs of white clouds here and there. People were out walking, enjoying the day even though it was chilly outside, it being the middle of November and all.

She'd woken up and fixed breakfast as she'd done so many times before, and they'd eaten at the table as a family as they usually did when one of them cooked. Steve wasn't usually there, of course, but he'd been very welcome at their table.

She'd showered, gotten dressed, and was heading over to Steve's house. Tomorrow she'd go to school and get her make-up assignments. She wouldn't have to work because of the doctor's excuse, but she'd just go hang out somewhere during working hours so her mom wouldn't get suspicious.

It felt weird that things weren't weird. She hadn't even had nightmares, though that could have been because she'd been too completely drained to have a nightmare.

"I kind of feel like the sun shouldn't have come up this morning," she admitted. "I mean . . ."

"I know. Everything's different, but we have to act like it's the same."

"Yeah."

The thing was . . . she didn't know if she could pretend like everything was the same. She had been to an alternate dimension, had met a girl with super powers, had come face-to-face with a monster, so of course nothing was the same.

And now she felt like crying.

"Steve?" Her voice was hushed and wet, and he glanced at her even though he was driving. "How do we do that?"

"I dunno," he said. "I guess we're just gonna have to be dumb teenagers."

"I've never been a dumb teenager."

"Well, then . . . keep me from being a dumb teenager."

She grinned a little. "Well, I've got my work cut out for me then."

Steve laughed then, which made her laugh, and it wasn't long after that that they were in his driveway.

Once inside the Harrington house Jessica made herself at home in the living room while Steve went to get cleaned up. Knowing him, he could take forever, especially if he planned on fixing his hair.

She turned the TV on to a news channel to see if word had gotten out about Will yet, and it had. The news reporters were baffled about how exactly there had been a body to bury when, obviously, Will Byers wasn't dead.

They were playing it off as "The Boy Who Came Back to Life", but Hopper had given a statement about how the medical examiner that had done the autopsy hadn't done the lab work properly and the boy that had been dragged from the quarry hadn't really been Will.

The night Will had disappeared, he'd really only gotten lost in the woods and the reason he hadn't been able to respond to anyone that had been looking for him was because he'd lost consciousness. He was sick due to being out in the cold, and he needed time to recover.

Hopper also stated that any reporters caught harassing the Byers' would be taken into custody. The police would probably be kept busy then.

---

About thirty minutes later, Steve was back downstairs, ready to take Jessica to get her car. He'd cleaned up as much as he could, given that his face was still bruised and busted from his fight with Byers the day before.

Jessica was watching TV, though she was half-asleep on his couch.

"Hey, you gonna be okay to drive?" She hadn't gotten much sleep, and she was on pain medication.

"Yeah." Her eyes widened slightly. "Just got too still for too long, I think."

She stood up and slowly stretched, grimaced because of the movement, before heading to the door.

"I might, um, come back here. I'll drop Dustin off at the hospital and come back."

"Okay. You wanna hang or crash or what?"

"Maybe both."

Once in the car she turned to face Steve. He'd been about to start the car but could feel she was about to say something important, so he waited.

"I still don't like you being home alone. Something could happen, and I wouldn't know because they would cover it up."

"Nothing's gonna happen to me."

He was more worried about her, to be honest, because she'd been more involved than he had. If either of them was a target, it wouldn't be him.

"Anyway, I'll get some movies or something and we can order a pizza later."

"Sounds like a plan."

---

Jessica's car was right where she left it the night before, in the Byers' driveway.

"Hey, I'm gonna follow you for a bit," Steve said. "Make sure you don't swerve or anything."

"Okay." It made sense because her house came first, and he could just



go by when she pulled into her driveway.

Her driving was fine, though, and she didn't feel any different mentally from the pain pill she'd taken.

Jessica was planning on just picking Dustin up and leaving, but Hopper's truck was in her driveway. She waved Steve on by when he stopped and asked if she wanted him to stay.

"It's just Hopper, so it's probably nothing."

She couldn't help thinking, though, *what now?* It probably was nothing, but that didn't stop dread from filling her stomach as she got closer to her front door. Her breakfast threatened to come back up, and that was the last thing she needed, the stress of vomiting.

Her mom and Dustin were both in the living room talking to Hopper when she went inside. Everyone looked her way so she froze where she was, screen door still open before banging shut behind her, making her flinch.

Neither her mother nor her brother seemed upset at all, so maybe nothing was wrong as she'd told Steve.

"Hey," she said. "What's going on?"

"Remember how you asked last night if you were in trouble?" Hopper asked. "I said no, and you're not in trouble with me. I didn't think about it because of everything that was happening then, but I thought about it today, that you might be in trouble with your mom."

"Okay . . ."

"I told her about the fire at the Byers' house and how you were late because you were helping Jonathan. The phone was kind of destroyed, so you couldn't call."

"Right," she said. "The fire. I-" She looked at her mom. "I didn't call because of the phone, and there was a fire. I didn't mention it because of all the excitement with finding Will, and apparently my brain isn't functioning properly today."

"Understandable." Hopper turned back to her mom. "Ms. Henderson, I'm sorry for any misunderstandings. As for Dustin and his friends, they're not in any trouble either. I let them in the school last night so they could do an experiment. We had the school's permission. There was a . . . some chemical thing, and I can't explain it because science has never been my subject, but that's why there was such a fuss. The building is safe now, and school will resume tomorrow. There was a wall that was damaged, and that part of the building will be closed, but everything else will remain the same."

"Man!" Dustin exclaimed.

Jessica grinned at her brother's reaction because she knew he actually liked school – only because of science class – but if the school hadn't been cleaned he could have spent more time with Will.

Speaking of . . . "Did you need anything?" she asked Hopper. "Dustin and I were going to go see Will."

"Nope. I've pretty much covered everything."

"Great." She sent him a genuine smile. "Thank you."

He hadn't had to think of them at all or the trouble they may or may not have been in, and he hadn't had to care enough to come get them out of it if they had been.

"No problem, kid."

---

On the way to the hospital Jessica told Dustin that she'd probably come in for a minute but that she was going back to Steve's.

"Why?"

"Because Steve's alone and I'm not completely sure we're actually safe from these lab guys. Everyone else has someone to go to home to. He doesn't."

"Hm, and you kind of like the guy."

"Well, he is my best friend," she said, intentionally being clueless.

"Jess, you've been in love with that douche bag for almost two years. And you still are or you wouldn't have put up with him. You don't hang around other people who act like he does."

That was true. She'd never willingly hung out with Tommy or Carol. They'd just sort of become a package deal when hanging with Steve. And she'd always called them out on their crap. If it weren't for Steve, though, she probably wouldn't have even known who they were, and they definitely wouldn't have known who she was.

"Look, you can't say anything to him. He and Nancy just broke up, and I don't want that . . . influencing anything."

Dustin scoffed. "Like I'm really gonna talk to that loser."

She felt a giggle bubble up her chest and burst out of her mouth. It hurt her stomach, but it was worth it to feel the joy that laughing could bring.

Dustin didn't really know Steve despite the fact that she'd been friends with him almost since the time they'd moved to Hawkins. But Steve could be a douche bag and a loser. Maybe he'd do better now, though, since he'd seemed to have learned his lesson.

---

Okay, so this is probably my favorite chapter so far! This is where things kind of veer off from canon. I'm filling in the spaces between seasons one and two. I know for sure I'm at least getting through the second season. I'm not sure about Season Three because . . . well, it's not out yet. But I think ending at Season Two is a good goal for a stopping point at the moment.

## 10. Chapter 10

### Chapter Ten

Will recovered pretty well over the next week, though his cough remained. Joyce confided in Jessica the fact that when she and Hopper had found Will, he'd had some tube-like thing down his throat, which was probably why the cough remained. His throat was probably irritated, and there was no way to know what exactly the tube had been doing, or why it had been in him.

Will was at home now, though he still hadn't returned to school. The environment of the Upside Down was extremely toxic – to the point that Hopper and Joyce had been made to wear haz-mat suits to go in – and the lab doctors didn't want Will around a lot of people until they were certain he wasn't contagious.

They were pretty sure he wasn't, it was just that he'd been over there for almost a full week, and they needed to make sure. Neither Nancy nor Jessica had shown any sign of illness and they had been over there, too, if only for fifteen minutes.

Jessica had nightmares about those fifteen minutes – that and the night she'd been clawed. She dreamed at least once every night. She'd been right about having been too tired to dream that first day, but now . . . boy, did she dream. She'd even taken to sleeping with the light on because it helped ground her when she woke up terrified. If there was light, then she wasn't in the Upside Down because there was no light over there.

Other than the nightmares, though, everything continued on as they normally did. She went to school and, after that first week, to work. She spent time with Steve when she could – without Tommy and Carol because Steve hadn't gone back to them – and worried about him when she wasn't with him. His parents were back home, though, and even though he was still essentially alone he had people at the house with him.

At school, things weren't that much different aside from the fact that everyone had heard about the fight between Jonathan and Steve and

that Steve had lost big time. The proof was on his face, which still hadn't cleared up much. It wasn't swollen anymore, but the cuts were still there and the skin was still discolored.

Everyone knew about Nancy and Steve breaking up as well, but that wasn't big news because Steve didn't usually stay with the same girl for long anyway. The longest relationship he'd ever had with a girl was with Jessica, which didn't count because she'd never been his girlfriend.

For the few days his parents hadn't been home, Steve had picked Jessica up for school and taken her home. Because of her wounds Steve was allowed to carry her bag for her to her classes and it excused him from being late to his own.

She had her car now, though, because his parents were home, and she was at work, in the ticket booth. It was Friday and not as slow as other days usually were. Her wounds were healed up enough that she was sure they were not going to open up again, but sudden movement still made pain shoot through her.

Jonathan had started coming back to work, but he usually worked the custodial position. He preferred it that way because it meant he didn't really have to talk to anyone. Mostly he just cleaned up the popcorn on the floor after each movie and took the garbage bags out to the alley dumpster. Occasionally he was responsible for the bathrooms depending on the shift he was working.

They talked more than they used to, but it was only in passing at work because they weren't usually in the same area. She was strictly ticket booth and concession counter.

They talked at school – they all did: her, Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan. Steve and Jonathan were still a little iffy around each other, but they both had a sort of understanding that if one of those creatures ever came back around, they would have each other's back.

Jessica hung out at the Byers' house more often than before because she took Dustin over to visit Will – especially if he wasn't going to be back before dark. She didn't trust the night time as much as she used to, and the Byers' didn't live in town. Usually Mike and Lucas were

there as well, still grateful that Will was alive and there with them, though she could tell that Mike was still messed up about El because he was more withdrawn than she'd ever seen him. He'd gotten close to her even though she'd been with them for only a week, and now he missed her terribly.

Joyce was keeping Will caught up with his school work – or Jonathan was, at her request. He picked up Will's assignments on his way home from school. Will had all the help he needed because they were all willing to help him.

The Byers house had been fixed – the hole Joyce had made with an ax, and the part of the roof that had collapsed under the pressure of the demogorgan ripping into their world.

It was close to Christmas vacation now, and Jessica had gone half-and-half with her mom on an Atari game system for Dustin. She would let him pick out a game for it later because she had no idea about those kinds of things.

She even asked Joyce if it was okay if she bought Will a new sketch pad because Will loved drawing, and his work was actually pretty detailed for someone his age. Plus, with everything he'd gone through he might need an outlet other than talking, and art was a healthy way to do that. Joyce had been fine with it – she was going to buy him new Crayons anyway, the pack that had over a hundred in it.

Jessica had no idea what to get Mike or Lucas – or Steve for that matter, but they always gave each other at least one thing every Christmas and every birthday, so she'd figure it out eventually.

At one point over Christmas break when Jessica was over at the Byers' place, she noticed that Jonathan had a new camera. She knew Joyce hadn't bought it because he never would have told her that his old one had been broken.

"You replaced your camera."

"Nancy gave it to me," he said, and then with a shy but knowing smile, "I think Harrington bought it, but obviously he couldn't give it to me himself."

"Right." She chuckled while beginning to feel warmth fill her insides. If Steve had bought Jonathan a camera to replace the one he'd dropped to the ground on purpose it was only fair, but it also meant that he really did want to make things right.

"No more sneaking pictures, though, right?"

"Right, well, I was only going to sneak them of you," he teased.

And with that he snapped a picture and she pretended to be offended.

"You better not develop that one."

"Why not? That'll be a great picture."

If he said so . . . He was the one who knew photography.

Two days later Jonathan showed her the picture he'd taken and he'd been right. It was a good picture. Not planned, obviously, so she hadn't been posing. Her face was open and bright, but there was also a softness to it. She'd been thinking of Steve, specifically him trying to do better and be better, and that was the moment Jonathan had captured.

She was unguarded in the picture, having been in a playful mood. She'd been comfortable and it showed in the way she'd been dressed – loose-fitting shirt and jeans – and the way her hair had been up in a messy bun, a few strands down and framing her face.

And *this* was going to be Steve's Christmas present – or part of it anyway.

"Can I have this?"

"Sure. It is you."

"Thanks. Now . . . where's the best place to get a nice frame?"

---

She settled on a light brown wooden frame, one that was just expensive enough that it wouldn't break easily. She placed the picture in it and wrapped it. She wrote Steve a little note and put it in an

envelope before taping it to the wrapping paper.

This wasn't anything big, but she thought Steve would appreciate it, or at least she hoped he would. Especially the note she'd attached.

She gave it to him the day before Christmas and told him not to open it until he got home and to make sure he was alone when he read the note.

At that moment, though, they were just cruising around in her car. Steve had bought her a whole collection of cassettes of her favorite bands – mostly rock and pop – and they were now listening to one of them.

Snow was falling slowly from the sky, but the roads were safe – obviously, or she wouldn't have been driving around on them. Her hand was no longer bandaged, and there was only a faint line where the cut had been. Her stomach was mostly healed now too, but the scar lines there were pink instead of white, and she still felt some discomfort whenever she moved too suddenly.

Steve's face had healed, and there were no marks left behind. She hoped he'd remember them, though, and why he'd gotten them.

"So, you're coming over tomorrow, right?" Steve asked. "Please save me from all my dad's friends and the uncomfortable silences."

The Harrington's had an annual get together early in the day on Christmas. She usually went because he always invited her. He really did hate the parties his parents threw.

"I'll come for a little while." She sent him a grin. "Then I'm stealing you away so you can have dinner with me and my family."

It was sad, but his parents wouldn't miss him, and they didn't really have Christmas dinner, anyway, not after having the party.

"That – that's awesome." Then, "Why can't I open my present now?"

"Because I asked you not to."

The truth was . . . she was a little embarrassed by the note she'd



written and didn't want to be in his presence when he read it.

---

When Steve got home that night he went to his room almost immediately. He gave his mom a quick 'hi' but that was it. That wasn't unusual, but he had a reason that night to want to get to his room.

He was curious about the note Jessica had written him. He could tell what the gift was by the feel of it, but he didn't know why she'd felt the need to write about it.

He unwrapped the present thinking he was going to find an old picture of them together, something to remind him of the friendship they'd shared and could share again now that he'd realized how much of a jerk he'd allowed himself to become.

But that wasn't what the picture showed. This wasn't a picture he'd seen before. The picture had been taken at the Byers' place – he recognized the background. She was seated on the couch, he could tell even though the picture was a close-up, her shoulders and her face. She was facing the camera, but she wasn't eyeing it, so she'd been taken by surprise. She'd been caught smiling – not beaming, but as if she were thinking of something that made her happy and maybe a little wistful. She'd also been caught in every day clothes. Clothes she wore at home when she knew she wasn't going anywhere, clothes that oozed comfort and relaxation. That meant she considered Jonathan a friend if she allowed herself to relax around him.

Her hair was up, but some of her curls framed her face messily. It made him smile. He loved when her hair was messy; it always seemed to fall in a way that made it seem as if she'd fixed it that way, as if she wanted it messy.

He moved on to the note then, opening it carefully. At a quick glance he saw that it wasn't very long, and he wondered again why she'd written it and why she couldn't have just told him instead. Then he read:

Dear Steve,

Jonathan is enjoying his new camera. He told me Nancy gave it to him, but he suspects that you bought it. I believe he's right. He snapped this picture of me when he told me that and when I realized it means that you really do want to make things right.

Admitting you're wrong and doing the right thing can be hard, but it is worth it, and I am proud of you. That's what Jonathan snapped a picture of – me being proud of you.

Love,  
Jess

Steve had not set out trying to make Jessica happy or proud of him when he'd bought Byers the new camera. He hadn't even wanted the guy to know he'd been the one to buy it, which was why he'd given it to Nancy to give to him, but Byers wasn't stupid.

He hadn't expected Jessica to find out, though, and he really hadn't expected to have her proud of him. His heart jumped at the thought because not many people had ever expressed that particular emotion towards him. He found that he liked it, and that it was coming from Jessica . . . made it better, sweeter. He cared what she thought about him, what she thought about in general, and hoped that one day she'd be able to tell him she was proud of him out loud and not just on paper.

---

When Jessica arrived at the Harrington's the next day, Steve met her at the door. They *had* to mingle for at least fifteen minutes so they wouldn't seem rude, but then they went up to his room. He put on some soft pop music on the radio.

She immediately found the picture she'd given him on his nightstand. If he wanted to, he could look at it before going to sleep. It was lined up with where his head would be placed on his pillow. The note was propped up against the side of the frame.

"Did you like your present?"

"I did," Steve said, smiling. "It's . . . different."

"Well, I seriously didn't know what to get you because you pretty much have everything you could possibly need. Then Jonathan took that picture and showed it to me. When he took it, I basically told him to get rid of it, but he didn't because he said it was gonna be a good one."

"He wasn't wrong."

She felt a smile begin to form at the compliment. She was happy he was satisfied with his gift and had even kept the note.

At her full height, Jessica still only reached Steve's chin, so she always had to lean her head back just a little to look into his eyes if they were standing close together, as they were.

"I meant what I wrote, Steve. I am proud of you."

Steve didn't get flustered or embarrassed easily, but he lowered his gaze away from hers as a shy smile came over his lips.

"Thanks."

She shrugged sheepishly as she felt a certain type of awkwardness fall over them, the kind that happens when there's a mutual attraction but neither person is brave enough to do anything about it. It didn't last long, but it had been there.

The thing was, they were great friends, and they obviously meant more than that to each other – but if they allowed themselves to feel that and do something about it, it could mess up what they already had. It scared her.

"Steve?" she whispered without really understand why she was doing it. She just thought speaking loudly would ruin the moment.

"Shh," he hushed, brown eyes suddenly softer but also sad. "You don't have to say anything. With everything that's happened –"

"I'm afraid," she blurted out. "Okay? I am afraid."

"Of what?" he asked, gently grabbing her arms and sliding his hands over them. "Of . . . me?"

"No!" she quickly assured him. "No. But there's something here between us, Steve. We've both felt it. Or . . . I hope you have, and that I didn't just embarrass myself."

He nodded, pulled her a little closer. "It's there. What's so scary about it?"

"Because it's us. You're my best friend. And if we did this and one of us messed up and we ended it, then we wouldn't be able to be best friends anymore. We wouldn't be able to, not after . . ."

"And what if we didn't mess it up?" He was speaking softly, his hands cupping her face now, her hands on his chest. "What if we tried and things went right?"

"Well, I –"

She'd honestly never thought of that because she'd only ever considered what would happen if things went wrong.

Steve's lips touched her cheek briefly and her breath caught in her throat at the contact. He caught her gaze with his and her heart fluttered at the small, sincere smile on his face. He had kissed her cheek before and she had kissed his, and it had never been a big deal, but this time it was. This was a turning point, so to speak, for them to either embrace their feelings and move forward or to ignore them and keep things the same as they had been.

"Was there anything scary about that?"

"Uh . . ." Her hands tightened over his shirt. "I'm not sure. Maybe we should try again."

His face brightened at her teasing, but he did as she'd requested only this time he kissed her lips instead of her cheek. As their lips met, Jessica felt something loosen inside her chest. She'd been waiting for this, she realized, waiting for Steve to want this with her and he finally did.

The kiss didn't last long – it was actually more an innocent skin-on-skin brush of the lips – but it was a good first kiss, and it made her feel warm inside because it was Steve she was kissing.

"Whoa," she whispered before biting her lip.

"Tell me about it," he said, hugging her to him.

She returned the hug and pretty much just nuzzled her face against his chest like a cat would when someone was petting it.

She wasn't afraid anymore. Sure, something could happen, but they actually cared about each other. They could at least try this out and see where it would lead.

---

Christmas dinner at the Henderson household was not a huge affair at all. They had ham, mashed potatoes, green beans, and coleslaw for supper. The best part was her mom's homemade apple pie, still warm, with ice cream.

Everyone ate at the table, Jessica and Steve sitting across from each other. They shared not-so-secret smiles with each other, and Dustin kept glancing between them with an arched eyebrow. He even gave her a grin, and a mischievous one at that. It was enough to make her blush and look down at the table.

Dustin knew – somehow – that things had shifted between her and Steve even though her mom was oblivious. How'd he know? They weren't acting differently, really. They just smiled at each other more.

She wondered then what people at school would say when they found out she was with Steve now. They hadn't discussed it, really, but they had kissed and to her that meant they were together now. People knew Steve's reputation and would probably assume things that weren't true. She would just have to deal with it. She couldn't control what people thought or said. She could only control how she reacted to it.

After everything was put away from dinner but while Dustin and Jessica were still washing the dishes, Dustin brought up the topic of Steve. He said, "I thought I was gonna have to put up some mistletoe for you guys, but I see my help is not needed."

"Hush!"

Steve was still in the kitchen, at the table. There was nothing for him to do really, so he was just sitting there.

"What? You were basically kissing with your eyes! I don't know how Mom missed it."

Her face was flaming and probably beet red. She was tempted to throw the dish rag at Dustin's face, but that would just make a mess that she would have to clean up.

"You're not allowed to kiss in front of me."

"Dustin!"

"What?"

"Lay off her, dude," Steve said, though he didn't seem upset. He actually sounded amused, if she was being honest with herself.

She wasn't upset at Dustin either, but he did need to let it go. It was not okay to tease her. Everything was new, and she wasn't exactly secure in the fact that she was now with Steve.

"Hey, go help your mom in the living room," Steve said. "I'll take it from here."

Dustin had been drying the dishes once Jessica washed and rinsed them. That was Steve's job now.

"You okay?" he asked after Dustin left the kitchen.

"Mm-hm. I just didn't know he would figure it out so soon."

"Do you . . . not want people to know?"

She could tell that he was hurt just by the thought of her wanting to keep them a secret. That wasn't what she wanted at all. She wanted to be open about it, but . . .

"I . . . Dustin's my brother. He's supposed to tease me. But what if everyone else does too?"

"Well, now that we're together you know I'm gonna be with you whenever I can between classes, and we share a few, so . . ."

"Right." She had never cared about what anyone had thought about her before, and she shouldn't care now. "I'm just being weird."

Steve was her first real boyfriend, though. She'd been on dates and gone to parties with different guys, but none that she'd actually cared about. They'd never been Steve.

"You're always weird," he quipped. "But that's okay."

He bumped her hip with his playfully, and just like that her mood lifted.

"So . . . we're gonna have to suffer through whatever Christmas movie Mom picked out before you go home. Is that okay?"

That was a Henderson tradition. They would always watch a holiday movie after Christmas dinner. Most of the time Jessica lost interest within fifteen minutes and fell asleep on the couch, but this time Steve was beside her. Instead of falling asleep, she used the time to get acquainted with Steve's hand. It had been resting between them, on the couch, and she'd slowly slid hers under his so she could slip her fingers between his.

Dustin saw this but didn't mention it; their mother may have noticed it, but her gaze remained glued to the TV.

She took in the small smile Steve gave her as he squeezed her hand, and she began rubbing small circles over the back of his hand with her thumb. It made his smile grow and she grinned at the effect she had on him.

Steve liked physical contact, she'd always known that. Jessica had never brought it up and she never would, but she thought it was because he never got the attention he needed from his parents – neither were big on showing affection at all – and so Steve got it elsewhere when he could.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. She'd done that before in front of Dustin and her mom, so it was no big deal for anyone but

Steve and Jessica. It meant more that night, and eventually Jessica brought Steve's arm up and around her shoulders so she could rest more comfortably against him.

Her mom did look at them then. Even though her mom was usually oblivious to the things she and Dustin did – or at least appeared to be – she was noticing this, and she seemed to approve, which made Jessica happy

She still didn't pay much attention to the movie, but this time it was definitely not because she fell asleep. It was because of Steve Harrington and the adoring looks she sent him and that he returned. It was nice. More than nice; it was probably the best feeling she'd ever felt, warm and content – which meant a lot considering what they'd been through. It was almost weird to feel content after everything.

After the movie was over Jessica and Dustin opened their presents – every year they each got one expensive thing and the rest were small things. Action figures and comic books and things like that for Dustin. Lip gloss and other types of make-up for Jessica.

Dustin immediately went crazy when he opened his Atari and a game called Space Invaders with it. Mom had picked it out. It was not something Jessica would have picked, considering the monster thing they'd had to face not that long ago, but her mother didn't know about any of that.

Jessica went crazy too, but not over a game system. Her mother handed her a red box, one that obviously contained clothing. When she opened it, there was tissue paper surrounding the edges, but inside was a genuine leather jacket – not the dainty ones girls usually wore, either. This was more like the kind a biker would wear, something that looked nice but would also keep her warm.

"Mom?"

Jessica had never mentioned wanting a leather jacket – or any clothing period – but she had wanted one since she'd ruined the last one she'd had.



She held the jacket to her face and took in the coolness of the material. It felt smooth against her cheek, and it had a rich, earthy scent to it. She loved it.

She thanked her mom and hugged her before trying it on. It fit perfectly for her – meaning it was at least a size too big and she could squeeze it around herself.

"I love it!" she exclaimed. "I'm already coordinating outfits in my head."

Dustin rolled his eyes, but her mom smiled at her excitement while Steve took the time to appreciate his girlfriend in her new jacket.

---

When the night was over, Jessica walked Steve out to his car. She was in her new leather jacket, so she was nice and warm.

She noticed that Steve became alert as soon as they stepped outside. He looked around, shoulders tense, as if he were expecting an attack at any moment. With what they knew was around, she couldn't blame him.

"It bothers me too," she admitted. "Unless I'm working or with you or one of the others, I don't like being out at night."

At the car she gave him a quick kiss on the lips. Knowing her brother, he'd probably be watching from the window. The hug she gave him lasted longer.

"You'll call me when you get home, right? Let me know you're okay."

"Sure."

He kissed her once more, longer this time, because he didn't really care if her brother saw them. She grabbed onto his jacket, suddenly wondering if she really wanted him to go. He could crash on the couch again.

She felt him smile against her lips, so she pulled away.

"What?"

"You realize we got together on Christmas, so we are basically gifts to each other."

"Well, that just means we have to take care of each other," she said, meaning every word.

"I like the sound of that."

## 11. Chapter 11

### Chapter Eleven

One day in early January, once school was back in session, was when the kids at school started talking about Steve and Jessica. Some of their classmates made remarks such as 'finally' or 'what took you so long?' Those people were happy that they'd gotten over themselves and were now together.

There were some who were just plain uninterested. Those were Jessica's favorite because it really had nothing to do with anyone but her and Steve what was going on between her and Steve.

But then there were the jerks like Tommy and Carol, and some of Steve's old jock friends, who couldn't mind their own business or keep their mouths shut. Carol said that if she was willing to sleep with Byers then it didn't surprise her at all that she was with Steve. That was all because of the Nancy thing they'd all been part of the year before. It was like they had some square-relationship thing going, which was just ridiculous because neither Steve nor Jessica had been showing affection to anyone but each other.

And they did show affection – kissing in the parking lot outside one of their cars, kissing at their lockers between classes, or holding hands in the hallways while walking. Nothing inappropriate, really, just couple things, and they had nothing to do with Jonathan or Nancy – or anyone, for that matter. But it didn't stop Carol from making up stories.

And the thing was, Steve's reputation was being used against them both. Steve had been seen with a lot of girls – certain types of girls, girls who didn't want a relationship, just fun for a few nights, or even just one night – and so any girl he got with had to be that type. Even though Jessica had no reputation when it came to guys, the fact that she was with Steve now gave her one.

It was stupid, and Steve hated that his behavior had brought her name down, even if what Carol said wasn't true. Only certain people believed it, anyway. The ones who actually knew Jessica didn't listen

to a word of it. They *knew* she wouldn't have slept with Jonathan Byers because she'd only just started talking to him around the time of Will's disappearance. Now . . . Steve, on the other hand, everyone seemed to know she'd liked him for a while and it wouldn't have surprised them if they had slept together already because they'd known each other for years. They hadn't slept together, though. The ones who knew her didn't care, however, because it wasn't their business what she was doing with her boyfriend.

Steve was bothered by the rumors flying more than Jessica was. Even though she'd been anxious about it before, she didn't care now that she knew it was only Tommy and Carol, and people like them, that were talking trash about her and Steve. They really weren't worth her time.

It was also in January that Chief Hopper got everyone together – the kids and the teens that had been involved in the Upside Down fiasco – in the one interrogation room the police station had. No one knew what they were doing there, but Jessica had had to lie to her mom about it. Well, Hopper had, anyway. He'd been waiting for her when she'd gotten home from school. All he'd said was that she and Dustin needed to come down to the station once Dustin came home.

He just needed to talk to them, they weren't in trouble, but it was easier to do it at the station. So there they were.

At first it was just her and Dustin. Then Steve. Nancy and Mike, along with Lucas. Joyce, Jonathan, and Will.

"Hop, why are we here?" Joyce asked after they'd all settled into the interrogation room.

There wasn't much space left. The room hadn't been made for this many people.

"A doctor from the lab wants to speak with you guys about –"

"What?" and "No way" filled the air. Had they really been called here because of Hawkins Lab? Weren't these people through with them yet?

"Chill out, chill out!" Hopper said. "They want to know how you guys are, which really means they want to make sure you're not gonna break and spill about anything."

"Maybe we should," Nancy said.

She felt that way because of Barb. Aside from Will, Nancy was probably the one who'd lost the most – Barb had been her friend for years. And the thing was no one could admit she was dead, so everyone just assumed she was missing, had run away. No one else had been close to Barb, so Nancy probably felt alone in her grief.

Then there was Mike, who'd lost El. No, they hadn't been friends for years, but they'd connected on a level that was more than just friendship. According to Nancy, Mike sometimes fell asleep in the basement now. He tried communicating with El every night using the walkie-talkie.

The whole Byers' family seemed pale and withdrawn. Will was having nightmares – probably worse than the ones Jessica had – but he had a clean bill of health. The cough had gone away completely almost two weeks ago, but his skin was still paler than it used to be, and he had dark circles under his eyes. So did Joyce and Jonathan though. Jessica wondered if they were having nightmares too.

Hopper stayed with them while the doctor from the lab talked to them. The doctor was a middle-aged woman with brown hair, and she seemed nice enough and she really did have a psychology degree. She was willing to give them sessions twice a month if they felt they needed it.

"You expect us to trust you after everything?" Joyce asked.

"We don't, actually." She'd introduced herself as Dr. Lisa Lancaster. "Which is why Hopper has agreed to bring you to each session, should you decide you need him to, if you choose to accept the offer."

Jessica's initial reaction was 'absolutely not' because this was the same lab that had made it possible for a creature from another dimension to come to their world and take Will and kill Barb – and maybe a few other people they didn't even know about. Ben's death

had been because he'd helped El, and Hopper had said at least two hunters had gone missing and he suspected it had something to do with the lab.

But Joyce asked, "Can you help him? He has nightmares even when he's awake."

Poor Will, Jessica thought. At least she had nightmares only at night when she was sleeping.

"He's having flashbacks. It's a form and symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. There's been a lot of research dealing with soldiers coming back from war. They can get triggered by loud noises or flashes of light, maybe even by getting grabbed suddenly."

"Will?" Jonathan asked. "You have any of that stuff?"

Will shook his head.

"I don't like sleeping in the dark anymore," Jessica admitted, and Will did nod at that.

"Same," he said. "Or I like to turn a light on as soon as I open my eyes."

"Oh, why didn't you say anything?" Joyce asked. She didn't sound mad at anyone but herself. Her son was frightened and there was nothing she could do. As a parent, that was probably one of the hardest things to go through.

"Dustin?" Jessica prompted.

"I'm completely fine. I wondered why you were keeping the light on, though. I thought maybe Steve was just sneaking in your window or something."

"Dustin!"

The thing was, the first time she'd had the nightmare about the Upside Down and getting stuck there she'd screamed herself awake. Nothing super loud – her mom hadn't even heard it – but Dustin's room was right next to hers and he'd rushed in. She didn't know what

he'd been planning to do if she'd been in trouble because he hadn't had a weapon, but the point was that he'd come for her when he'd heard her in distress. He was a good brother. But he hadn't been having nightmares and she didn't understand why.

Lucas said he was fine as well. Nancy didn't want to talk because there was nothing anyone could do for her problem. Jonathan was not a share-your-pain kind of person. Mike's pain couldn't really be helped either. Joyce, however, reserved the right to accept later if Will didn't get better.

Jessica didn't trust the woman, no matter how nice she seemed, and Steve claimed to be fine, though she knew he wasn't, but she also reserved the right to change her mind if she decided to.

---

After they got out of the police station, Jessica, Dustin, and Steve went to a small BBQ place nearby – mostly just for the fries and drinks – and ate together. They sat in a booth, Dustin and Jessica on one side, Steve on the other. There was an arcade across the street, and Dustin went there with a handful of quarters after he was done eating.

"So, why didn't you tell me you were having nightmares?" Steve asked.

"For the same reason you keep telling everyone you're fine. Are *you* having nightmares?"

"No," he said. "But I'm not getting much sleep either. It's . . . Whatever. Ya know? Don't worry about it."

"But I do." She nudged his leg with her foot. "You know I do."

If Steve kept losing sleep, it was going to affect him in some way. Through his grades, maybe, which were only good enough to keep him on the basketball team, or through him maybe getting hurt while playing basketball, which would wreck his chances of getting into a decent college, because his dad had already said if Steve didn't follow into the real estate business that he wouldn't pay for him to go to college. Steve would have to either do what his dad wanted or work

extra hard in school for the rest of the year and into the next so he could up his chances of getting a scholarship – and he couldn't rely only on basketball.

"Yeah, I know you do," he admitted. "I get a couple hours of sleep every night. I doze off and on during the day when I'm not doing anything else."

"I go to sleep," Jessica said, "without a problem. But then I have a nightmare whether the light is on or not, and it takes a while to get back to sleep. I keep . . . thinking about that place."

"The Upside Down?"

"Yeah. I –" She took a deep breath. "I was over there for a little bit. With Nancy. The first night we went out looking for that monster. We found an opening, and Nancy decided it would be a good idea to go in. She wanted to find Barb."

"You never said anything."

Jessica shrugged. "We were only over there for about fifteen minutes, but that thing chased us. We heard Jonathan calling for us, but we couldn't – we couldn't find him because the place we'd gone in had already closed."

Jessica could picture everything as if she were there – the dark, ashy atmosphere that made it hard to breathe, the complete silence that surrounded them until the thing had growled at them, the nasty, slimy web-cocoon stuff they had crawled through – and her heart began to race. Not in the good way that Steve caused either. No, this was the way she felt when she woke up from a nightmare, heart thudding so hard it almost made her want to vomit.

"Hey," Steve said, bringing her out of it. He'd moved from the booth across from her and slid onto the one she was sitting on. "Hey, it's okay."

But it wasn't really because whatever had just happened had caused her to start shaking, and her breath to come in gasps – she couldn't get enough air.



"Steve!" She grabbed his arms and squeezed. "I can't – I can't breathe!"

"What? What do I do?"

She didn't know. It had never been this bad before, but she'd never talked about it either.

"Steve!"

She buried her head against his chest and he wrapped his arms around her, gently at first and then more tightly when she began to cling to him.

"I'm here," he said softly. "You're here. We're together and you are not in that place. Okay?"

He just kept talking like that until she calmed down, but even when she got her breath back she felt like she wanted to cry and kept her face hidden so he wouldn't see.

She couldn't believe she was breaking down in the middle of a restaurant. It was embarrassing, and people would probably talk. That was just one of the hazards of living in a small town.

---

When Jessica had started panicking – Steve didn't know what else to call it – he hadn't really known what to do. All he knew was that she didn't need to feel alone at all and she needed an anchor to ground herself, so he'd let her use him as one. If she was there in the real world holding onto him, then she wasn't in the Upside Down without him.

When she was calm enough he paid for their food and then led her to his car. They'd driven separately, so they had both cars, but until Dustin came back out or Jessica went to get him, they could just relax in the BMW with the heat running, music playing.

Jessica was still trembling. Steve felt horrible for not really being able to help, but he'd never seen Jessica do anything like that before. He'd never seen anyone do that before, though he'd felt that way himself the night he'd seen that monster. He'd never been so scared before. Any unusual shaped shadow freaked him out at night now,

but he still couldn't imagine waking up thinking he was stuck in a messed up alternate dimension, and that's what Jessica seemed to be going through every night.

At least she was breathing easily now and not crying anymore, even if a few tremors passed through her every now and then.

"Are you . . . okay?" he asked hesitantly, afraid of causing another panic attack.

She gave a half-hearted shrug, ducking her head. She hadn't really made eye contact with him since they'd made it to the car.

"Does that happen often?"

Steve couldn't handle thinking about her waking up alone and not having anyone to help her through whatever that had been.

"No, that's the first time I've lost control like that. I mean, I wake up afraid, but I don't cry or –" She did look at him then, "- I'm sorry."

"No, it's –" He wanted to say it was fine, but nothing was fine. Nothing should happen in anyone's life to make them react that way. "You should be able to tell me these things. Okay? We should – we should be able to tell *each other* these things."

"Right. But still –"

"No. No buts. I – I never took Nancy seriously enough when she tried to talk to me about things. I don't wanna make that mistake with you."

Now Steve felt like panicking because Jessica's eyes had filled with tears again. What had he said that was bad enough to make her want to cry? Nothing had been offensive or hurtful, he didn't think, but what did he know about girls, really? And he was good at messing up without realizing it until after the fact.

"What'd I do?"

"Nothing."

"Then why're you crying?"

"I don't know!" she exclaimed. "You just said that stuff about not wanting to make mistakes with me, and it made me feel like crying again."

Steve decided it was best to just keep his mouth shut for a while rather than risk upsetting her further.

In the end, that worked.

---

Jessica had calmed down by the time Dustin came out of the arcade, but her eyes were still puffy and her face was still red when he found them.

"What'd you do to my sister, you douche bag?"

"Nothing!" Steve exclaimed.

"Then why's she crying?"

"Dustin, he really didn't do anything. Okay? I'm just feeling a little messed up today. That lab lady didn't help."

Whatever righteous indignation Dustin must have felt at the thought of Steve having hurt his sister disappeared and he said, "Oh."

"Yeah. Are you ready to go home?"

Dustin nodded. "I'll go wait in the car while you kiss goodbye and stuff."

She sputtered out a laugh as he walked away and got into her car. She was sure Dustin had said that on purpose to try and lift her mood by the light teasing, and it did – a little – but still . . .

"He doesn't have nightmares," she said. "How does he not have nightmares? It's like it happened, but it hasn't really affected him negatively. He was able to –"

"He's younger. His friend came back. They do all the things they used

to do. All they think is that if they keep their mouths shut they'll be safe. We . . . are not that naïve."

"Right. I do the things I used to do and I still freak out. Don't really feel safe anywhere anymore. I mean, what if the gate isn't really closed and – and there's more than one of those things?"

Steve tensed there in the driver's seat and said, "That thought had crossed my mind, but no one has mysteriously gone missing or . . . turned up dead. Nothing weird has happened since . . ."

"Yeah."

It made her feel better to know that she wasn't the only one keeping up with current events. Neither of them would have done that before all the Upside Down/demogorgan stuff, neither of them would have cared much, but now she watched the news at least twice a week.

Aside from the residual fear and grief, no one was going through anything considered weird. If they had been, whoever it was would've said something, Jessica was sure, and no one had.

"You know, if you're so afraid, I could always come over. Dustin already thought I was sneaking in . . ." he said suggestively.

"No," she said. "You don't have to sneak in. Mom doesn't care if you stay over, but you're *not* staying in my room. Dustin has the room next to mine. You know that."

"Comfort!" Steve said, grinning. "I was offering comfort."

"Sure you were."

She leaned towards him, head tilted just-so, and he briefly met her lips with his. If Dustin hadn't been waiting for her, the kiss would've lasted a lot longer, but he was, so it didn't.

"I really was talking about comfort," he declared, his brown eyes soft and warm. "I don't think your brother would allow much else."

"You're not wrong about that."

She was tempted, and her mom wouldn't care if Steve stayed the night – not in her room, obviously, and not in her bed, but . . .

"We should turn the guest room into an actual guest room," she said. "That way when your parents aren't home you'd have a place where you wouldn't have to be alone."

"So . . . I'll see you later tonight?" he asked hesitantly. "You kind of said no and yes within a minute."

"Yes. I'll let mom know you're coming."

---

Steve went home for a few hours, mostly to shower and pick up a few things that he would need for school the next day.

To be honest, he was still a little freaked out by what had happened with Jessica at the restaurant. She hadn't been breathing right at all, and he hadn't known what to do because it had almost been as if she *couldn't* breathe right.

It had scared him, to say the least, and when he'd offered to go over that night, he really hadn't been thinking of anything other than making her feel better. As she'd said, her brother's room was right next to hers, and that kid was into everything and would have no problem bursting into her room if he felt like it.

That day in the car was not the first time Dustin had checked up on Steve to make sure he wasn't doing anything to upset his sister. Steve wasn't sure if he was just being a good brother or if he'd heard about what had happened with Nancy, but Dustin kept an eye on both of them. It didn't seem to bother Jessica, so it didn't really bother Steve.

Before Steve could leave the house, Jessica called to ask if, since he was staying over anyway, he wanted to make a movie night out of it, and that was fine with him.

"Cool," she said. "So . . . I can take care of the movies if you take care of the snacks."

"No problem. What d'you want?"

"Well, I've got the popcorn, so maybe some kind of chocolate and, um . . . soda? I guess. Dustin likes Three Musketeers."

"Okay. See you in an hour or so."

---

Since Jessica now knew what they were going to be doing that night she and Dustin went to the video store.

"You can pick one movie," she told him, "but you still have to be in your bedroom at ten."

Dustin usually went to bed on time even if he didn't go to sleep until around midnight. As long as he got up and went to school on time, their mom didn't really care.

"So, are you guys sleeping together now?" Dustin asked. They were in the video store, so he wasn't being loud, but still . . . he had no filter and it didn't matter to him where they were.

"No, Dustin, we're not – we're not sleeping together. We've only been an actual couple for two weeks." she said. "Not that it's your business what Steve and I do."

"Eh, kind of is if you're going to be in the room next to mine."

"Dustin . . . I wouldn't . . . not with you around."

In fact, Steve had never mentioned sex at all, had never hinted at them doing anything other than kissing and some very light over-the-clothes petting.

"Okay," he said simply, and picked up a movie. Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi. "I want this one."

She hated movies like that – well, she didn't hate them, but she couldn't get into them either.

Her expression must've given her away because Dustin said, "What? It'll give you and Steve time to suck face."

"We do not –" She broke off. "Do you not like Steve?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes!" she said, louder than she probably should have. "It does, Dustin, because I would like for my boyfriend and my brother to get along. I'd like for you not to give him any crap tonight. Okay? I don't mind the teasing, but I don't like that you seem to think Steve only wants sex from me."

Dustin suddenly found the case he was holding very interesting. Jessica didn't get after him very often and she yelled at him even less than that. She usually couldn't find a problem with him, and she didn't really have a problem with him then, but with everything else that had happened that day, she couldn't deal with the comments coming from her brother.

She grabbed two more movies – Jaws and Christine – and led a silent and sullen Dustin to the counter to pay for the rentals.

Once out in the car, Jessica let them sit there for a few minutes in silence. She didn't like how she'd handled her brother's teasing.

"Dustie, I – I shouldn't have yelled at you. I'm – people have been giving me crap at school about dating Steve. I don't – I don't need it from you too, okay?"

All this she said gently in way of explanation and to make up for earlier.

Quietly, carefully, he said, "Are they calling you what they called Nancy?"

So he did know. Why had she ever thought that he wouldn't? They lived in a small town in Indiana. Of course he knew – all of the kids probably knew, and they knew Steve's part in it.

"Not exactly that, but close enough. And . . . Steve is trying, okay? That's why I just want you to cut him some slack. You don't have to be super nice to him or anything because that would be weird, but don't go out of your way to give him crap either. He . . . did some not good things before, but he realized they weren't good and he tried to make them right."

"I didn't know it was bothering you."

"It usually doesn't. Just . . . messed up today, like I said."

"Okay. I'll be nicer, but do I have to like him?"

"I hope you will one day. When you see that he doesn't want to hurt me."

And just like that, things were good between them again.



## 12. Chapter 12

I know it's been a while, guys, but I've been working on other stuff. Plus my grandmother's been in the hospital and had surgery, and I've started working, which takes up a lot of time too! Anyway, enjoy, and let me know what you guys think.

### Chapter Twelve

That night went better than Jessica thought it would have. She put *Star Wars* in first because Dustin had to go to bed earlier than she and Steve did. She and Steve talked quietly through it because Steve wasn't much into that type of movie either.

Dustin was seated on the floor in front of the couch where Steve and Jessica were, so they were able to get an occasional kiss in during the movie. Even if she'd been paying attention she still wouldn't have known what was going on in the movie, so she didn't pay attention to it.

Dustin stayed up long enough to watch half of *Jaws* and then he couldn't keep his eyes open.

"You can watch the rest tomorrow," Jessica said. "After school."

"Mm . . ." Then Dustin carried himself to bed.

Their mom had been messing around with something in the kitchen, claiming she hadn't wanted to interfere with their movie time, but now that Dustin was going to bed she decided she could go upstairs as well.

On the way she said, "You guys know the rules. If you end up in the room, keep the door open."

"Mom?" Jessica wasn't sure what her mom had just given her permission to do.

"Keep the door open," her mom repeated before going the rest of the way up the stairs.

Jessica waited until her mom was out of sight before looking up at Steve.

"Is this a test? Like, if you go up with me later, are you going to pass or fail?"

"I don't know. Your mom just said to keep the door open like she's always said when I've been in your room."

"True." She shrugged. "Let's finish the movie and figure it out later."

She snuggled against him, head tucked under the arm that was around her, and watched through the end of the movie where the shark exploded. By then it was almost midnight and Jessica decided it was time for her to go to bed. She had to get up at six for school, and she had to work the next day too.

"Okay, Christine is gonna have to wait," she said. "I'm done."

She stood up, looked towards the stairs and then back at Steve.

"Um . . . did you actually want to sleep on the couch?"

"Absolutely not."

She grinned and held out her hand. "Well, come on then."

---

Steve had been in Jessica's room before and was used to the cool blue walls and the white lace curtains. He'd never spent the night in her bed, but he knew her favorite bedspread was plain white silk and that was what was covering the bed then.

Jessica had changed into a shirt-and-shorts pajama set and had already climbed into bed. Steve was debating whether or not it was okay to take his shirt off. It wasn't like he'd snuck into her room. No, her mom had given him permission to be there, and he didn't want to abuse that privilege.

"Steve . . . I've seen you without your shirt before. Just . . . take it off."

So he did, along with his jeans, and it was fine. He got on the bed, too, under the covers with her. She'd been right. She'd seen him in just shorts before when he was playing basketball. This wasn't really any different . . . until she curled up against him and he felt her bare legs against his and her hand on his bare chest.

It was definitely different. But not bad. Not bad at all.

"Is it okay if we keep the light on?"

"Sure." He remembered what she'd said earlier about the light helping her when she woke up from a nightmare.

She pecked him on the spot where his jawline started and then closed her eyes to try to sleep. Steve was just glad she didn't feel awkward about him being there in bed with her. As with most other things, he was making a much bigger deal out of this than she was.

Steve learned that night that it was much easier to sleep with the light on because he didn't have to keep watching the shadows around the room to make sure it wasn't something that shouldn't be there.

He also learned that Jessica had no problem going to sleep, but she had a nightmare about two hours in. She didn't wake up screaming or crying or trembling, for which Steve was grateful, but she did jerk awake when he was just getting good and asleep himself. It caused him to startle.

"What? What?"

"Just a dream," she said, breath coming in gasps but nowhere near as bad as earlier that day.

During her sleep, she had moved away from him, but now she leaned against him again, resting her head on his shoulder. She put her hand on his chest over the spot where his heart was beating, and Steve didn't know if she knew it, but she matched her breathing to his.

It helped her calm down quickly and to go back to sleep easily.

In the end, Steve fell into a deep sleep a little after two and woke up at six when the alarm went off.

---

Steve got ready while Jessica took her morning shower, and Dustin came in the room without knocking. The door hadn't been closed, so that was okay.

"What's up, kid?" he asked when Dustin sat on the bed. He was still in his pajamas and his head was ducked so as not to look at Steve until Steve spoke.

"Did you know people are calling Jessica names at school?"

"What? I knew they were talking, but –" he broke off. "Did she say –"

"Yesterday, at the video store, we talked a little." Dustin looked at him earnestly then. "She acts like it doesn't bother her, but it does."

Jessica hadn't said anything to him about anyone saying anything – except for Tommy and Carol and some of the jock guys Steve still had to hang around at practice.

"I'll keep a look out," he said. "But I might need your help because she hasn't said a word to me about it."

Dustin gave a grin, front teeth missing, and hopped up off the bed.

"Cool. Now let's get out of here before she gets out of the shower. No sneakin' peeks of my sister!"

And he was gone. Steve was tempted to chase after him for that comment, but he followed slowly out of the room and down the stairs. The little dude was right. He didn't need to be there when Jessica got out of the shower.

---

School was uneventful in the way that school usually was, and then Jessica had two hours before she had to go to work, during which she went to visit Will. Joyce was at work and Jonathan was leaving when she got there.

Will looked a lot better that day. His color was back, and he smiled easier. He hadn't been let back in school – somehow Joyce had made a deal with the school, so as long as he kept his grades up he could

stay out as long as he needed. Jessica was sure there was more to it than that, but that was all she knew about it.

She had a reason for being there and couldn't stay long, so she got to it.

"How're you doing?" she asked. "After yesterday."

He shrugged as they settled on the couch. The house was in a lot better condition than it had been in November. No Christmas lights strung around, no letters on the wall, which had been painted over, and the house was more or less clean.

"Just thought you might wanna talk or something. Not everyone knows this, but I was over there too. Nothing like you were. I mean, it was only a few minutes, but it was still scary, and I . . . had a panic attack or something yesterday about it."

"Panic attack?"

"Yeah. I felt like I couldn't breathe, and my chest was tight and I felt like I was back there. I, um, thought maybe you had felt something like that too, because . . . maybe that PTSD stuff is true. I didn't want you to feel alone if you were experiencing any of that."

"I . . . sometimes. I don't – I don't have a panic attack, but I do feel like – like I'm back there. I *see* it. The darkness and that stuff that I wasn't supposed to breathe in."

Will's brown eyes were wide and now misted over.

"I do feel like my chest gets tight, but my whole body does. I just – I just freeze."

"Does your mom know? Or Jonathan?"

"Now, because of yesterday."

"Good. They need to know or they can't help. Okay? We all want to help, and we all need help sometimes. It doesn't make you less of a person."

She tapped him on the arm lightly.

"Think about it. You survived over there for a week. I know I wouldn't have been able to do that. So, you're pretty amazing."

He managed a watery smile and leaned against her when she hugged him.

"You can call if you need to talk. You had it way worse than I did, and sometimes I feel like I've barely got it together – but that's okay. I don't think there's a real time frame for healing."

She held onto him for about another minute before letting go.

"Okay, so I've gotta go to work now, but remember what I said. It's okay to need help."

---

That night at work Jessica worked the ticket booth. Tommy and Carol came through and didn't give her any problems until her shift was over. They obviously had not left once their movie was over because they were seated on the hood of her car when she reached it.

"Come on, guys. Get off my car."

"Or what?" Tommy asked, not moving from his spot.

"Or I'll call Hopper and have him charge you with harassment, now get off my car."

Really, she just wanted to go home. Was that too much to ask? She didn't think it was.

"Did she just threaten us?" Tommy asked, looking at Carol, amusement all over his face.

"I think she did."

Now he did get off the car, only to crowd against Jessica.

"I'd be careful what I say if I were you. Not all of us bend to your will like Steve."

He was so close to her she could smell alcohol on his breath. He must have snuck some in to the theater or had started drinking once he got out.

She tried to just go around him and that's when he grabbed her shoulders – not hard, but enough to keep her from moving forward.

She wasn't a fighter, not really, but she had enough survival instincts to react immediately and shove him hard enough to put a few feet between them. Tommy's eyes widened and his lips formed a grin. He hadn't expected her to push him but it seemed to amuse him that she had.

"Don't ever grab me again."

It was then that Jonathan came out of the theater. He wasn't off yet, so he must have seen what was going on and was checking on her.

"Everything okay?" he asked, looking at her. "Should I call Hop?"

"I don't know." Jessica eyes Tommy and Carol. "What d'you think? You really want to do this? You grabbed me, so I could probably get an assault charge if I wanted. Maybe threatening bodily harm . . ."

"Tommy, let's just go," Carol said and grabbed his arm. "I don't think she's kidding."

"Really not," Jessica agreed.

And so they left. Jessica's shoulders slumped as the tension she hadn't even been aware of left her body. She felt shaky and a little short of breath. She was sure the water-works were on the way.

"Jess?"

"Hm?"

"You're okay. They're just jerks. But you should still tell Harrington what's going on."

"There's nothing he can do. I don't want him getting in trouble just because they're talking crap about me."

"I don't know if you noticed, but Tommy wasn't just talking tonight. He could have hurt you if he wanted to."

That much was true. Tommy had gotten physical with her when he'd reacted to her threat. She hadn't expected that at all.

"Thanks for coming when you did. And you're right. If it happens again, I'll tell Steve. Hopper, too, probably. I can handle the talking because they'll find something else to talk about eventually, but . . ."

Jonathan gave her a small smile and then opened the car door for her. She pulled the keys out of the pocket of her pants and started the car.

"Be safe," he said and stepped back so she could pull out of her space.

She watched him through her rearview mirror as he made it safely back into the theater.

---

The next morning couldn't come fast enough for Jessica, if only because she got to see Steve in the school parking lot before classes started. When she spotted him, she basically flung herself into his arms and let herself rest there.

"I missed you," she said. "I know I just saw you yesterday, but –"

"I missed you too," he admitted.

"Good. I don't feel so needy now." She leaned away just a little so she could see his face. "You wanna do something tonight? Like take a ride and stop at a restaurant outside of town? Doesn't matter where, just not in Hawkins."

"Uh, sure. Did something happen?"

"Something always happens. Tommy and Carol were waiting for me outside the theater last night when I got off of work. I just wanna do something where I know we won't run into them."

"Okay. I can meet you at your house around . . . six?"



"Great."

She kissed him then and she immediately felt his lips turn up into a smile – she loved that part. She brought her hands up and locked her fingers together at the back of his neck as he placed his hands at her waist, underneath her leather jacket but on top of her shirt.

She pulled away briefly, but he followed her with his lips, so she allowed the kiss to continue for a few more seconds.

Then, "Steve, as much as I'd like to continue, we've got to get to class. And it's the middle of January. It's cold out here."

He squeezed her sides playfully. "I thought I was warming you up."

"Maybe. But we still have to get to class."

---

Steve and Jessica met in the cafeteria for lunch, where they were served something that was supposed to be a form of meat, mushy peas, and mashed potatoes. Jessica turned her nose up at it, but she ate some of it anyway.

They had gym after lunch. Tommy was near the entrance of the boys' locker room when they went by it. Steve would double back after dropping Jessica off at the door to the girls' locker room.

As they passed by, though, Tommy couldn't resist and just had to say something.

"Hey, Harrington, I wouldn't get too close if I were you. She's so frigid, she might call the cops if you touch her."

"Do what?"

Steve had stopped in his tracks and turned to face Tommy. Tommy didn't have gym that period, so he must have just been waiting for them to pass by.

"Yeah, she totally freaked out last night and threatened to call the cops because I was sitting on her car."

"You wouldn't move," Jessica said.

Steve didn't know what to think about that. He wasn't there at work with her, and he already knew she wouldn't allow him to drop her off and pick her up. She was too independent for that, and stubborn.

"We were just sitting there, and you threatened us."

"Yeah, let's not forget about the part where you grabbed me, you douchebag!"

They were drawing a crowd of onlookers, which Steve knew Jessica would not like, but they were in the middle of the hallway, so he couldn't help that.

"Dude, you put your hands on her?" To Jess, Steve asked, "Why am I just hearing about this now?"

"Well, it happened last night, so . . . and I already took care of it. I told him I wouldn't hesitate to call Hopper, and –"

"Press charges for assault," Tommy interrupted and stepped forward, towards Jessica, but Steve stepped half in front of her.

"I'm not hurt this time, Tommy. Don't touch her again, or we're gonna have a problem."

Steve was not a great fighter by any means, but he could be ferocious when he was protecting someone he cared about.

"Steve . . ." He looked at Jessica when she touched his arm. "It's not worth it. Just . . . let's go."

When Steve was absolutely sure Tommy wasn't going to throw a punch, Steve backed away.

"Running away again, Harrington? That's all you do, give up and run away."

"Shut up, Tommy," Jessica snapped. "You're just pissed because he's not hanging out with you anymore."

"And whose fault is that?"

"You know whose fault it is," Steve said. "And it's not hers!"

By that time, Coach Williams had come out of the gym because most of his students, who should have already been dressed for class and out of the locker rooms and in the gym were still out in the hall watching the drama unfold.

"A'right, break it up! All of you head to class before I write everyone up and have you running laps in detention."

Nobody wanted that, so the hallway began to clear pretty quickly. Tommy still got out one last threat, though, which was, "One day, Henderson, I'll show you the meaning of assault," and that was it. Steve had had enough. This wasn't Tommy and Jessica going at each other with words. This was Tommy threatening to hurt Jessica, and Steve couldn't allow that.

So he threw the first punch, which Tommy hadn't been expecting, obviously, because he hadn't done anything to block it and he hit Tommy right on the cheek.

"Steve!" Jessica's voice made it through the chaos, but he was too focused on Tommy, who had gotten his bearings already and was rushing forward to tackle him.

Steve was faster, though, and was able to use Tommy's momentum against him to push him to the ground. That was as far as the fight got because Coach Williams grabbed Steve and got between him and the fallen Tommy.

"Cool it, Harrington, or you'll be benched for the rest of the season."

"But, Coach –"

"You were provoked. I know, I saw. Cool it, anyway." Then to Tommy, "Get up. And you are benched for the rest of the season."

Tommy stood up, and Steve noticed with a small amount of satisfaction that Tommy's cheek was already beginning to bruise.

"Everyone else get to class," Williams said. "If you're supposed to be in gym this period, I want you dressed down and waiting when I get back from taking this guy to the office. And Harrington, go get some ice for that hand."

Coach Williams led Tommy away while Jessica walked with Steve to the nurse's office.

Throughout the rest of the day Jessica thought a lot about what had happened, about the fight and about what Tommy had said. Not about the assault part, even though that was scary enough. What she thought about were the words about her being frigid and about her being the reason Steve would give in or run away. What had he meant when he'd called her frigid? She was the right amount of warm and affectionate with Steve. Maybe not with anyone else, but they weren't her boyfriend, so she didn't have to be. And she wasn't making Steve act in a way he didn't want to act, right? Steve himself had once asked her if he should do something just because she'd asked him to, but that was when he'd been ragging on Jonathan and she hadn't liked it at all, so she'd told him to stop. She hadn't been wrong doing that.

They would have to talk about it after school. She wanted all this off her chest before their date that night, or she wouldn't be able to enjoy it.

---

Okay, so here's where I have my issue! How far would Tommy take his harassment of Jessica? Tommy to me didn't seem like he'd actually hurt a girl, but he wouldn't be above scaring her a little. That's just my opinion. We already know he's not above vandalism and tarnishing someone's name - neither was Steve really until Nancy. I have a few ideas in my head, but your opinion would be welcome as well.

## 13. Chapter 13

### Chapter Thirteen

Steve met Jessica at her locker after school. He'd taken to doing that since they'd gotten together, but he'd have met her there that day even if it hadn't been part of their routine. Tommy hadn't been sent home, and Steve didn't want Jessica to be caught alone.

Jonathan was there as well, his locker next to Jessica's, but they were more focused on getting their things in their backpacks than they were talking to each other.

Steve wouldn't exactly call Jonathan a friend, but they talked now without either having a problem with it. They knew that if one of those things ever came back around they had each other's back.

Jessica's usual reaction when they met at her locker was a wide smile and a quick kiss, but this time he received neither. In fact, her eyes held concern and a little bit of sadness. He wondered if anything else had happened since the fight earlier.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

He reached for her and was relieved when she allowed him to embrace her. It wasn't him that was bothering her then.

"We need to talk when we get to the car," she said.

"Okay. If this is about earlier –"

"It is," she admitted. "But I'm not mad or – something's just been bugging me, that's all."

"O . . . kay."

She stepped away, grabbed her bag, and put it on her shoulders before taking his hand in hers. He followed her out to her car. He always walked with her when he didn't have basketball practice – even then he walked her out if they had time before having to go back inside.

"Okay, so what's wrong?"

She nodded at the car before getting in. She tossed her bag in the back. When he got in, he placed his own bag on the floor in front of his seat since he'd have to get out to go to his own car.

"Jess?"

"Do I make you do things you don't want to do?"

"What?"

"Tommy, what he said about it being my fault that –"

"What? No. I told him it's not your fault, and it's not. It's his. It's not your fault that it took me so long to see what a douchebag he is."

"And you don't do things just because I ask you?"

"No."

"And I'm not . . . frigid?"

This got an even more shocked, "What? You do realize you're probably the most caring person I've ever met? Right?"

That earned him a small smile, at least, but it didn't last long.

"I don't think that was the type of frigid he meant, Steve. I think he meant something like I'm the type whose legs are tied together at the knees."

Steve felt a sudden fury fill him, not at her but at the effect Tommy's words were having on her.

"That is none of his business. It's no one's but yours."

He grabbed her hand and rubbed the back of it with his thumb.

"Besides . . . I'm sure you'll let me untie them when you're ready."

Jessica stared at him for a few seconds, unblinking, and he watched as her face and neck turned a lovely shade of pink.

Steve!" she exclaimed and pulled her hand away only to shove him playfully, so his back hit the door.

He couldn't help but laugh. Her reaction had been priceless.

"I'm kidding. Sort of. Anyway, we've only been together a few weeks. Okay? And I know with the other girls I . . . but this is different, you're different. You're my best friend and my girlfriend, and tonight is our first actual date, and you do not have to worry about being frigid."

As he'd continued talking Jessica had begun to relax further, so much so that she leaned in for a kiss after he was done.

"Thanks for the pep talk," she said. "See you at six."

---

Once Jessica got home it hit her that she had no clue what she was going to wear that night. She didn't even know where they were going exactly, just that they were going out to eat.

She figured it wasn't going to be anything fancy, or at least she hoped not, so she kept that in mind when choosing her outfit: a tight, black, long-sleeved shirt, an electric blue skirt that reached half-way down her thighs, and black leggings. She'd have gone without if it hadn't been winter, but it was and she didn't want to freeze her legs off.

She completed the look with black ankle boots. They made her two inches taller.

She lay her choices flat on her bed before going to shower, during which she used her best smelling shampoo and soap. She spent an extra few minutes on her hair than she normally did only because she tried to flip it to the side. It didn't want to work right, but it still looked okay. She tamed it to soft waves rather than unruly curls.

It still didn't have the same poof as Steve's did, and she didn't know how he did it.

All in all, she really liked how she'd fixed herself up, especially the skirt and the boots, and she'd gone very light on the makeup. Pink lip gloss and gray shimmering eye shadow.

She hoped Steve liked it.

She remembered telling Nancy that she couldn't understand anyone caring about what someone else thought about their clothes, and she hadn't been lying. Until that night she hadn't cared; she'd never dressed for anyone before. She had been on dates before, but had never seriously dated anyone, and hadn't really cared about the clothes she'd worn when with those guys.

They hadn't been Steve and they hadn't been able to get more than a couple dates out of her. Tommy may have been talking about that too, when he'd made the 'frigid' comment. He couldn't have believed she'd be okay with him just grabbing her the night before.

Either way, it was none of Tommy's business. Steve had been right about that.

---

At the Harrington residence Steve was also at the tail-end of getting ready. He had on jeans and one of his normal polo shirts and his Adidas. All he had left to do was his hair.

From the time he'd gotten home he'd been thinking about the conversation he'd had with Jessica. He remembered the fight he'd had with Jonathan about two months ago and he *had* asked her if she thought he should stop just because she'd asked him to. She'd said yes.

The truth was there wasn't a lot he wouldn't do if she asked, but it wasn't because she asked. It was because he cared about her.

Steve knew this was Jessica's first real date. She'd gone to dinner with a few guys before, had danced with multiple guys at the parties they'd gone to, but none of them had ever been invited to her house, had never had dinner with her family, had definitely never slept in her bed.

She'd never been with anyone. Steve would have heard about it if she had. She would've told him, he was sure of it.

Carol and Tommy had always said things about her not getting with



the guys she danced with – most girls did leave a party with whoever they chose to have fun with that night, but Jessica never did, even if she'd genuinely seemed to like whoever the guy was. She'd never gone off alone with the guy either.

Steve had always kept an eye on her too, when they'd gone out, made sure no one touched her drink when she took off to dance with someone. Not that he thought anybody would slip her anything, but one couldn't be too careful.

The fact that she'd never gone home with anyone had confused Tommy and Carol. They hadn't known what she'd been waiting for. Steve hadn't cared what she'd been waiting for. He was just glad she had.

Steve arrived at the Henderson household a little before six so he could go in and say hi to Jessica's mom and to Dustin. He knocked and went on in. Ms. Henderson was in front of the TV in the living room, Dustin on the floor with a text book and paper spread out in front of him. The second half of Jaws was playing on the screen.

"Hi, Steve," Ms. Henderson greeted him warmly.

"Hey, Ms. Henderson. Uh, did Jess tell you we're going out to dinner?"

"No, she didn't, but she's been up in her room getting ready for the past hour, so I figured something was going on."

"Mom!" Jessica shouted from upstairs. "He wasn't supposed to know that!"

Dustin snorted, ducking his head, and Steve grinned. She'd put in an effort to look nice that night. She wouldn't have wanted him to know that.

When Jessica started down the stairs, Steve moved to stand at the bottom to meet her there. The shirt she had chosen hugged her in all the right places, and the blue skirt was set off perfectly against the black leggings.

"You look beautiful," he said as she reached him. He sought out her

hand and she slid her fingers between his, squeezing gently.

"Thank you," she said and pecked him on the cheek. Then, "I was going to tell you, Mom. Steve's a little early."

"Well, I thought I'd say hi to your mom and Dustin." He frowned a little. "Would you rather I had just honked?"

"No." Jessica squeezed his hand again. "You did it right."

Steve wasn't used to knowing either of the parents of the girls he hung around, and he had actually usually just honked the horn to announce his presence and waited in the car for the girl to come out. But this was Jessica and he knew her family. It was only polite to come in.

"So . . . where are you going to dinner?" Ms. Henderson said.

"Um . . . not sure yet. I wanted to go somewhere outside of Hawkins," Jessica admitted.

"Okay. You still have to be back by ten."

"She'll be home on time," Steve promised, grabbing Jessica's jacket from the coat rack by the front door and helping her put it on.

They ended up taking Steve's car. He opened the door for her so she could get in the passenger seat and she grinned at him. He dipped his head to kiss her on the lips quickly before shutting the door and going around to get in the driver's seat.

Once inside the car he said, "I meant what I said. You look beautiful."

This time she ducked her head and Steve noticed as her cheeks became tinged with pink. Steve loved that she only ever blushed for him.

"I would tell you that you look nice," she said, "but you look nice all the time."

"Aw," he teased, to which she told him to shut up.

"So . . . where do you want to go?" he asked her.

"I dunno. Just pick a direction and drive. I know I want ice cream for dessert, though."

"You realize it's about twenty degrees outside?"

"Well, it won't be twenty degrees in the restaurant! And I want ice cream."

"Okay, okay." Steve grinned. "Ice cream it is."

Steve did pick a random direction – south – and turned the radio on and up. "Uptown Girl" by Billy Joel was on, and Jessica began hopping around in her seat.

And when she's walking  
She's looking so fi-i-ine  
And when she's talking  
She'll say that she's mi-i-ine

They both sang along, Jessica moving her head side-to-side along with the beat. Neither of them tried to sing on-key. They were just messing around, having fun.

"So, any requests other than ice cream?" he asked.

"Uh . . . good French fries?" She shrugged. "Chicken tenders? I'm not really in the mood for a burger."

They continued driving for about twenty minutes, passing by a Skate Land and a movie theater on the way. They picked a place and Steve pulled in. They walked in hand-in-hand and waited for someone to show them to a table, where they sat across from each other.

"Your server will be right with you."

Two menus were placed on the table, one in front of each of them, before the hostess walked away. Steve and Jessica opened the menus at the same time, but Steve stopped on the first page, where the appetizers were listed.

"They have cheese sticks with marinara sauce," he said, knowing cheese was a weakness of hers.

"I'm already getting chicken and fries . . . and ice cream."

"So. You didn't eat much for lunch. You can go all out for dinner, yeah?"

"You'll share them?"

"Absolutely."

A woman in a dark green uniform headed towards them and, when she reached them, told them her name was Tina and she would be their waitress.

"What can I get y'all to drink?"

"Coke for me," Steve said.

"Just water for me," Jessica said. "And an order of the cheese sticks to start."

"Sure thing, Sweetie."

They ordered their meals too, Jessica sticking with her choice of chicken and fries, Steve choosing a burger and fries.

Once the cheese sticks arrived Jessica immediately grabbed one. Steve knew she loved when the cheese was hot and stringy and fresh. That was when they were best.

Steve smiled as Jessica closed her eyes in satisfaction.

"See, aren't you glad we got them?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Before their meals arrived, music began playing – familiar pop music – and Jessica tapped her foot along with the beat.

"Hey, Jess? Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Did Tommy scare you last night?"

Jessica froze for a second and then shrugged. "Maybe at first, but not really. I don't really feel as if he'd actually hurt me for real."

"I don't think so either," Steve agreed. "Still . . . be careful. Okay?"

She nodded before continuing to enjoy her cheese sticks.

---

Aside from the brief mention of Tommy during dinner he wasn't mentioned again. Steve and Jessica both seemed to understand they needed a night full of positive energy to get rid of all the negative they were smothered by in Hawkins. That's why when they were on the way back home Jessica didn't understand why Steve pulled into the parking lot of the skating place they'd passed by earlier.

"What're we doing here?"

"We're gonna skate," Steve said and grinned.

"But, Steve . . . you know I can't skate."

She did not share in his enthusiasm. She really couldn't skate. She'd been skating exactly twice in her life. The first time she hadn't left the carpet to get in the rink; the second time she had, and had immediately fallen on her butt. She'd also sprained her wrist when she'd caught herself. She'd taken that as a sign that she should just stop trying to skate.

"I do know you can't skate."

He still seemed way too happy with himself.

"Then why are we here?"

"Because it gives me a legitimate reason to not let you go for the next hour."

Jessica felt herself smile at that even though she felt a small amount

of trepidation go through her.

"Smooth," she admitted.

"So . . . it's okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah. But I actually did hurt myself the last time I went skating, Steve."

"I won't let you get hurt," he said. "Like I said, I won't let you go."

"Okay."

Once inside, Steve paid for the skates both of them would be using and they changed into them, leaving their shoes in a cubby hole the place had.

The lights above the rink flashed different colors, but Jessica noticed the red and blue the most. It was a little disorienting at first, the changing colors, and it made her hesitate at the edge of the carpeted area in front of the rink.

Music played loudly enough that Steve had to almost yell to be heard when he asked if she was okay. He'd gracefully stepped off of the carpet and onto the slick rink only to turn around and reach out both hands for her to grab onto, which she did. She still hesitated to move. She was afraid she would fall flat on her bottom if she took even one step.

Eventually Steve lifted her and set her on her feet. She was stiff and she clung to him as if her life depended on it. Her life might not have, but her balance definitely did.

Steve kept one arm around her and began to glide backwards, leading her forward. Jessica just hoped they didn't run into anyone.

"You need to relax, Jess. Move your legs. I've got you."

Steve had her. He wouldn't let her fall on her face – or not on purpose, anyway.

"Give me your hands," she requested, and he did.

Her legs were still stiff and she basically just let him lead her wherever for the first few minutes. At least she hadn't fallen yet. This was already loads better than the last time she'd been skating.

"See," he said, pulling her back towards him until their bodies touched. "Not so scary, right?"

"Debatable. But it'd be scarier if you weren't here."

Music was playing loudly enough to make her chest vibrate with the bass of it, and it had been since they'd been there, but she hadn't taken in the songs that had been playing. It was mostly popular dance music, upbeat and fun. She knew a slower song would come on eventually, though. Maybe she'd be brave enough to move by then.

Steve didn't let go as he'd said he wouldn't. He kept her close to him – an arm around her to help her keep her balance, or when she was feeling braver, holding her hands to lead her to the middle of the rink. Other people were there, teenagers mostly, or parents with their children, but the crowd was thinning as the time went by.

Jessica finally began moving her feet so she could move on her own, but she still hung onto his hand the whole time.

"Okay, this isn't so bad," Jessica admitted. "Don't let go, though."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

And he wouldn't, not when he knew how much she was trusting him to keep her on her feet.

Jessica seemed to be most confident when slow songs were playing because everyone around them slowed down as well. She probably didn't feel as if she were going to be shoved around as much when everybody calmed down.

She never did let the grip on his hand go, though.

---

Steve made sure they left so they could make it back to Jessica's house by ten, like her mom wanted her to be.

"So . . . did you have fun?" he asked once they were in the car.

Jessica had begun laughing and moving more freely about twenty minutes before they'd had to turn the skates in.

"Yes, I did. I still can't skate, though."

"You did okay."

"Yeah, right."

Before Steve could put the car in drive Jessica kissed him on the cheek and, when he turned to her, on the lips.

There was no hesitation and no timidity in her movements, but it still surprised him when she flicked her tongue against his bottom lip. He pulled back just a little so he could catch her gaze with his. She smiled sweetly so he leaned back in and pressed his lips back to hers to allow her to continue to take control of the kiss, which she did. She placed one hand on his cheek and the gentleness jarred him. She was being so loving, giving without taking.

"I really did have fun," she said as she pulled back and sat in her seat.

Steve could see the flush in her cheeks by the lights in the parking lot.

"Yeah?"

"The fact that I didn't fall helped a lot. And the kissing part was nice too."

"Well, the kissing is always nice," he teased just so he could see her cheeks go a shade pinker than they already were, and because she usually smiled when he teased her even the smallest bit.

"You gonna come in when we get back to the house?"

"Definitely. My parents aren't home, so . . ."

"Well . . . you know you can stay over."



"I know."

He put the car in drive then and they were off.

On the way home, Jessica said, "You know I wasn't kidding when I said we could clean out the guest room for you."

"Yeah, but where would you put your stuff?"

"The cellar. We could make it a thing. Me, you, Dustin, Mom even, if she wants to. She loves you and doesn't like that you're alone either."

"As long as it's not a problem."

Steve loved that he was important enough to Jess and her family that they would even consider letting him use the extra room they had, but he never wanted to be a burden.

"You're not a problem," she said, her voice soft now. "And you shouldn't be alone."

And that was that.

---

So . . . this was their date. Let me know what you think. I don't really know MUCH about Dustin's mom, so I added to her personality the way I wanted.

## 14. Chapter 14

### Chapter Fourteen

Jessica got permission from her mom to start cleaning out the extra room for Steve that weekend. It was supposed to be a guest room, anyway, and there was already a bed and a dresser, but the bed was covered with – well, a lot of different things, and Jessica didn't know what it all was, really. The dresser was surrounded by boxes, and Jessica didn't really know what was in them either. They blocked the closed closet door.

It was going to be quite the job, but she would eventually get it done.

"Do you want help?" Dustin asked from his place on her bed.

"Maybe. I was thinking that we could go through a little each day and then Steve could help move the stuff sometime next week. Put it in the cellar or junk it, depending on what it is."

"I think some of Dad's stuff is packed up in there too," Dustin said. "It'd be nice to go through it before we put it in the cellar."

Dustin's voice had gone quiet, which caught Jessica's attention because Dustin was hardly ever quiet while speaking. When she looked at him he was sitting there not looking at her. She could tell that the mention of their dad had gotten to him. That was usually a topic they just skipped over whenever they talked. It was painful still even though it had been years since their dad had passed away.

"You know . . . maybe you can keep some of it in your room. We don't have to put all of it away."

"You don't think Mom would care?"

"Of course not. She kept it so we would have something to remember him by."

So they began that day, going through some of the boxes around the dresser. The first one was filled with baby clothes, both Jessica's and Dustin's, and Jessica laughed at them, at how tiny the clothes were.

She knew they'd both been that small at one point, and she even remembered Dustin being that small, but it was still hard to believe.

"Toss it or keep it?" Dustin asked.

"Mom would kill us if we tossed these," she answered and laughed. "We'll put them in the cellar."

She put that box to the side and moved onto the next one, which held arts and crafts supplies. Definitely their mom's stuff, and since it had been stored in this box and left in that room it probably wasn't important, but she would ask before tossing it.

The next box was full of some of Dustin's old toys, which he went through but said they could toss without a hint of hesitation.

The fourth box they went through contained books packed from the time they'd moved to Hawkins, Indiana, and had forgotten about since. A few of them were Dustin's, but most were Jessica's.

*The Call of the Wild; Oliver Twist; Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; To Kill A Mockingbird; Animal Farm; Anne of Green Gables; The Secret Garden . . .*

Jessica had always been a big reader, more so before they'd moved to Hawkins, and definitely more so before she'd begun working at the movie theater, but she still loved to read. She would move the box of books to her room so she could go through them more thoroughly later. She had a bookcase that wasn't fully stacked yet in her room, so a few more books wouldn't be a problem.

---

The next day, Sunday, Jessica went through a few more boxes, only this time she was by herself because Dustin was over at Mike's. Steve would be over later, but at the moment . . . she'd found boxes of pictures from before their move, shoe boxes – many of them – full of moments captured on film, mostly birthdays and holidays spent with people she only spent time with once a year now.

Deep into the stacks of pictures she came across pictures from her first birthday. Obviously, her dad was in those pictures. It stopped

her short, and her throat began to fill clogged. At the sight of her father tears burned behind her eyes. Her family usually actively avoided talking about her dad, so to see him there in the pictures in front of her was a sort of shock to her system.

Her dad was the reason Dustin liked science and that Jessica liked to read. Sure, their mom supported them with everything she had, but their dad had been the one to do things with them. He had been into sports, hockey mostly, but hadn't been offended when neither of his children had been athletic. He'd done science projects with Dustin, had taken Jessica to second-hand book stores to pick out books for him to read to her, and then when he'd gotten sick, she would read to him. They both had been partial to Charles Dickens novels. Jessica didn't know why she liked them, but she did.

She continued looking at the pictures, the ones that featured her dad, until her throat hurt from holding back tears. She realized she hadn't cried for her dad in years. Of course, she hadn't seen pictures of him either, until just them. They were a reminder of how much she missed him.

The fact that they had packed up and moved almost as soon as he was gone hadn't helped any. She'd never really grieved properly.

She hadn't cried since that time she'd freaked out in the diner with Steve, but she felt like crying now and so she did, though this time it wasn't from panic. It was from the gaping hole she had in her chest. She only ever felt it when she allowed herself to.

Aside from the leather jacket she'd had to get rid of last November, she hadn't had anything to remember her dad by. They had buried everything in boxes and now Jessica had found them. She wouldn't let them be buried away again.

---

That was where and how Steve found Jessica when he arrived at the Henderson house at three. He'd knocked but let himself in, had said hi to Ms. Henderson and she'd told him where Jess was.

He hadn't expected to find her surrounded by pictures, hadn't expected to find her with red-rimmed eyes. She'd obviously been

crying, and he assumed it had something to do with the pictures around her.

"Jess?" he called out gently, not wanting to disturb or scare her by being loud.

He saw the tension seep out of her back and shoulders and could hear the relief in her voice when she said his name.

"Uh . . . are you . . . do you want me to leave?"

His instinct was to go to her, embrace her, try to make her feel better, but the truth was that he really didn't know what to do. She didn't cry a lot, so it was always a surprise when she did.

"Come sit with me," she said and moved some of the pictures around to make room for him on the floor beside her. She beckoned him over, so he went.

"What's wrong?" he asked as his butt hit the floor.

"The pictures. My dad's in them."

Jessica slumped against his side, her head hitting his shoulder. Steve let his arm wrap around her so he could hold her closer. His hand rested against her hip, over the pajama shorts she hadn't changed out of. He squeezed gently and he heard as she sniffled.

"You . . . you've never talked about him before."

The only thing Steve knew about Jessica's dad was that he had passed away and that Ms. Henderson had packed her kids up and moved to Hawkins because of it.

"Yeah, it's not something we do." She huffed out a breath that sounded like a laugh but definitely wasn't one. "I didn't know these pictures were up here. He's my dad and I could've had these the whole time, but instead they've been hidden in here!"

Jessica's voice had risen as she'd continued talking. Steve was afraid she was going to start yelling any minute now, which would just draw her mom's attention upstairs. If Ms. Henderson came to check

on Jessica, Steve was sure Jessica would hurt her mother by turning her words on her. After all, it sounded as if Jessica blamed her mom for putting the pictures of her dad in the storage/guest room and just leaving them there.

"Hey, Jess . . . Maybe . . . maybe your mom couldn't look at them. Maybe she still can't. She wasn't trying to hurt you. She was protecting herself."

Jessica stiffened against him even as he felt her begin to shake with silent sobs.

"I don't wanna leave him in the boxes, Steve!"

"You don't have to," he said, and turned her to face him. "You don't have to. Maybe you need to see them. You can put them in the closet in your room – or you could get photo albums, keep them in there. We could look at them together one day, if that would help. But don't be mad at your mom for not being able to look at these. Might be too painful for her."

She lifted her head to place a wet kiss against the side of his neck before settling against him again.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess. I was – I was going through the stuff in here, trying to figure out what we should keep and what we could get rid of and I wasn't expecting the pictures at all and – and there they were. And I found books last night, ones that he used to read to me, so I was thinking about him anyway."

She was speaking so quickly that she was almost stumbling over her words, but Steve understood anyway. He understood the fact that she'd had a relationship with her dad that he would never have with his own. He couldn't imagine his dad ever reading anything to anyone unless it was a contract of some kind.

"And then the tears came, and now here I am. I'm a *mess*! I haven't even gotten dressed yet, and I haven't done anything to my hair. And there you are, looking as good as ever. It's not fair!"

Steve turned his head to bury his face in the hair she was so worried

about. He didn't want her to see the smile that had taken over his mouth when she'd started fussing about how she looked.

It was true that she was in her pajamas and that her face was a little blotchy from crying. It was even true that her kinky curls hadn't been tamed down to . . . less kinky curls.

"Jess, I think you've forgotten that I've seen you first thing in the morning." He pulled away so his mouth wasn't so much against her, so his voice wasn't muffled. "Prettied up or not, you're still beautiful to me. And I kind of like the kinky curls."

"You do?" she asked, sniffing one more time. "Really?"

"Well, yeah." He caught one of her curls between his fingers and pulled gently before letting it go. It went back to its original place, as if he'd never touched it. "I can do that and they just bounce back."

She shook her head and huffed out a breath. This time it was a laugh.

"And as for these little short shorts . . ." He placed a hand above her right knee and tickled the skin there with the tips of his fingers. "You can wear them whenever you want. They show off your legs."

Jessica's whole body had a softness to it. She was fit without being athletic. Her skin tone was almost the same as Dustin's, a shade lighter, maybe, especially in the winter. She went out only when she had to when it was cold. Though she didn't like the full heat of the summer, either, unless she could hop in a pool to cool off. Spring and fall, those were Jess's seasons.

"Steve!"

She hid her face against him, probably to hide the flush in her cheeks. His fingers slid to the inside of her leg and she allowed him to reach about mid-thigh before squeezing her legs together and catching his wrist with her hand. He stopped, let her remove his hand from her leg. He had only been teasing her anyway.

"Okay?" he asked. She looked up then.

"Yeah. I, um . . . that was . . . well, good, kind of ticklish, but Mom's

here and that would've looked . . . not good."

Her voice was quiet and cautious, unlike how it had been earlier. She was never overly anxious about her choice of words unless she was feeling insecure about something.

"I mean, I know you weren't doing anything, but –"

"But it looked like I was."

"Yeah."

She kissed the spot on his neck that she'd kissed before, only this time she scraped her teeth over his skin and he let out a small gasp. He hadn't been expecting that, not from her.

She pulled away and the look she gave him was downright mischievous, insecurity forgotten.

"I can play, too, Steve."

---

After Jessica felt a little better, at least, she put the pictures back in the shoeboxes and moved them to her room. She needed to get dressed anyway, though she was going to leave her hair as it was. Why waste time on it now that she knew Steve liked it even when she didn't tame it all the way down?

Besides, the whole point of Steve coming over was so they could have dinner together – well, make dinner together and then eat it. Something that most people wouldn't believe was that Steve could cook. With his parents gone all the time, he had to learn. He hadn't wanted take out all the time, so he'd learned to make simple things.

They were making spaghetti that night. The hardest part would be the homemade sauce, and that was only because they had to dice up the tomatoes to put in the sauce.

They continued their play from earlier, bumping hips against each other, grinning whenever their eyes met. It gave Jessica's stomach butterflies, and sometimes she felt like giggling. It was a complete contrast to how she'd felt when he'd first arrived.



She hadn't been lying when she'd said the pictures had taken her by surprise and that was why she'd been crying about them. Steve had been so good, had even asked if she'd rather be alone instead, and of course she hadn't wanted to be. He'd hit the nail right on the head when he'd said she'd been mad at her mom for hiding her dad's pictures away, and she still was a little upset about it, but she wasn't going to let her mom know. Maybe it was like Steve had said and she just couldn't look at the pictures, couldn't face them because of who was in them.

Steve had made her feel better more quickly than anyone else would have, and the playful touching had been nice and something she hadn't expected but was completely okay with. It was Steve, though, so of course she was okay with it. She knew he'd never do anything she didn't want him to. If she said no, he would stop. He'd never hurt her that way or make her feel uncomfortable by pushing too far.

She knew that Steve felt that he'd maybe pushed Nancy a little when it came to them – in more ways than just the sex area – and he'd told her he hadn't wanted to make the same mistakes with her. That was why he hadn't ever really even mentioned sex in the few weeks they'd been together, and he was taking his cues from her.

At the moment, though, they were both at the stove, Jessica stirring the sauce in one pot and waiting for the water to come to a boil in another so she could put the noodles in, and Steve standing behind her with his arms around her and his chin on her shoulder so he could watch what she was doing. His fingers were tracing some kind of pattern over her stomach and she enjoyed the warmth of him pressing against her back and the feeling of him holding her while she was cooking. It was all very domestic and it made her feel happier than she had been in a while.

She brought the spoon up with a little bit of sauce and blew on it to cool it down before tasting it. She had put some sugar in it to get rid of the acidic taste from the tomatoes, so it was sweet – just the way she liked it.

Jessica turned her head toward Steve to ask if he wanted a taste, but his lips were right there, a few inches from hers, and she lost her train of thought. She allowed herself to lean closer so she could kiss

him, just a soft brush of skin-on-skin, but then Steve moved on to her jaw and then, moving her hair to one side, her neck.

He scraped his teeth against her skin, much like she had done to him, and wrapped his arms more tightly around her. She almost dropped the spoon as a shiver shot its way down her spine.

It was the first time she'd felt anything like this – this electricity – even when it came to Steve. She almost squeaked when Steve began teasing the spot right under her ear. Warmth began to pool in her stomach and her heart began to race. She'd never known her sweet spots, but Steve had obviously found one. It was lovely and she just wanted him to continue kissing her neck forever.

He was being so soft with her, she knew there wouldn't be any marks left on her neck for anyone to see, which she was just fine with. She still had to face her mom and Dustin later. They were all going to eat dinner together, and Dustin would tease her relentlessly if he saw anything that even resembled a hickey.

It was only when Steve pulled her fully against him that she realized exactly how into this Steve was. She felt him, half-hard already, through his jeans, and she tensed in his arms. Steve seemed to sense the change in her body language because he lifted his lips from her skin and loosened his grip from her waist without letting go completely.

"What's wrong?" His voice was a bit hushed and rough against her ear. "What happened?"

"We're in the kitchen. Mom could come in, and Dustin should be home soon."

She very deliberately moved her hips away from his and she felt Steve suck in a breath as if he'd been punched in the gut.

"Crap," he said as his forehead hit her shoulder. "Sorry. I wasn't – I mean . . ."

She turned around then. The first thing she noticed was that Steve's face was flushed. She didn't know if it was due to what they had been

doing of if it was because he now felt a little guilty for taking it so far.

She knew his body had just been reacting to their bodies being so close together. The fact that she'd obviously been enjoying it probably hadn't helped him out at all.

"Hey," she said, voice barely above a whisper. "It's okay. That was – that was so good."

Brown eyes met blue, his filled with hope."

"I didn't even know I liked having my neck kissed," she admitted. Then she said, "We can definitely explore that later, but not when – not when someone could walk in and see."

"You're not mad, ya know, about –" He glanced down at what would have been a big problem if they had continued kissing. "I thought, I mean you went completely rigid, so I thought maybe I had scared you or –"

"I have never been afraid of you, Steve Harrington," she admonished. "And you didn't do anything wrong. As your girlfriend, I would be offended if you didn't get hot and bothered when we – when we do things like that."

Steve grinned even as he began rubbing the back of his neck with one of his hands. It was a nervous gesture he had, and it would have been adorable if it hadn't meant that he was, in fact, nervous.

"Hey." She grabbed his arm to bring his hand away from his neck and then pulled him toward her. "I mean it. You did nothing wrong."

She pecked him on the side of his mouth, lingering for just a second, before turning back to continue stirring the sauce.

---

After the events of earlier, dinner was calm in comparison. Steve and Jessica had both calmed down long before Dustin had gotten home and definitely before either he or her mother had come into the kitchen, and now they were just sending shy but knowing glances at each other.

"Did you have fun at Mike's today?" Ms. Henderson asked Dustin.

"Yeah. Will was able to come over."

"That's great."

For the longest time, if someone had wanted to see Will, they could only see him at home. Joyce had understandably been scared to let him out of her sight, but now Will could go out to his friends houses or to the arcade as long as someone dropped him off and picked him up. Sometimes Jessica would drop by after school to pick him up on days she didn't have to work and either take him to one of the others houses or to her own – or to the arcade. He was no longer allowed bike privileges at all.

As far as the general population knew, when Will had gone missing for that week in November he'd picked up a bug that had completely shot his immune system to hell and he still had to have weekly check ups to make sure he hadn't caught anything else. It helped explain why he was being homeschooled for the rest of the school year.

"Hey, maybe we could have a movie night," Jessica suggested. "Saturday night. You guys can have an arcade day and then we can pick up some movies. I'll provide the snacks."

"Mom?" Dustin asked, mouth full of noodles.

"Sure," she said cheerfully. "Especially if Jessica is going to babysit since it was her suggestion."

Jessica really had no problem with that. She loved the boys and she might even invite Nancy and Johnathan. Steve could come too, obviously, if it wasn't too awkward for him. She'd leave that up to him.

## 15. Chapter 15

### Chapter Fifteen

At school the next day everyone was talking about a party this girl Tina was planning for Friday of that week. Tina was a cheerleader, and was also known for her parties. Like Steve, her parents spent a lot of time away from home due to business reasons, so she was able to throw as wild of a party as she wanted. Her house was more in the country part of Hawkins, so things tended to get louder and rowdier than the ones held in town. It was so out of the way that people tended to park in the field behind her house rather than on the road out front.

There was no particular reason for this party. She just hadn't had one in a while. Yellow flyers were being passed around to what appeared to be the entire student body but was really only the juniors and seniors.

Her parties were usually fun in that they had great music and enough drinks to go around for everyone. There was beer for people like Steve, who liked doing the kegstand. He held the record in Hawkins for the one who could do it the longest. His current time was thirty seconds. That was how he had become the "keg king" and "King Steve" which Jessica knew he no longer cared about at all.

There was also fruit punch laced with whatever alcohol available for people like Jessica, who couldn't even smell beer without turning up her nose in disgust.

Jessica found the yellow flyer hanging from one of the openings in her locker door when she went to exchange her books after first period. Steve met her at her locker like he usually did, and they both smiled and kissed like they normally did, Steve continuing to smile even after their lips met.

Even though he had literally dropped her off for first period an hour ago he made it seem as if he hadn't seen her in forever and that he'd missed her.

"So . . . you wanna go?" he asked after they'd gotten enough of each other. "You and Tina get along with each other alright."

"Steve, I gotta work on Friday."

"Only until nine, and Tina's parties don't get good until after that." He pouted as Jessica closed her locker door and swung her bag onto her shoulder. "Please. We haven't been to a party together in . . . months."

That was true. Jessica hadn't been to a party since before junior year started. It was hard with her work schedule and, adding in school and homework, she hadn't had time for parties.

And there Steve was with his cute little pout and his doe eyes that could also work as puppy dog eyes when he was pleading, which he was at the moment and Jessica knew she would never be able to say no to him.

"Fine," she said, pretending like she'd just agreed to the worst thing in the world. "If we must . . . we must."

Steve grinned and kissed the side of her mouth quickly before swinging an arm up and around her shoulders.

"Good. We could use some mindless, teenage fun."

Jessica wasn't good at mindless, teenage fun, but she would try for Steve.

---

Steve had basketball practice after school, but he still had time to walk Jessica to her car before. They met up at her locker and he waited patiently for her to fill her bag with the books she would need for homework that night.

"You know, if you didn't have to work, you could come watch me practice."

"Hm, that . . . that is so tempting." The way she'd scrunched up her nose at the suggestion made Steve realize just how tempted she wasn't at the thought of sitting through his practice.

Sports really weren't her thing. She just couldn't get into them.

He kissed her cheek quickly before they began walking towards the exit. Once outside Jessica shuddered dramatically. Even though she had her heavy leather jacket on she still seemed to be freezing. She huddled closer to him and he held her to his side.

All Steve had on was a light jacket, and he was fine. He usually ran hot anyway, so he guessed it worked that she didn't. She could always share his body heat.

"Why's it so cold?" she asked, voice smothered because she'd hidden her face against his arm.

"Well, it's winter," he said. "Just a shot in the dark."

"Right."

"You've only got about a month of cold left."

They reached her car, where she tossed her bag in the back seat before turning back around to fully envelope him in a hug.

Steve loved that she was so openly affectionate with him. It put him at ease knowing she didn't mind the kisses and the embraces that he always wanted to share with her. There were even times, like just then, when she initiated them.

"We've got about fifteen minutes before you have to go back inside . . ." she hinted, pulling away slightly so she could look up at him.

Steve pretended to be shocked. "Are you suggesting we make out in your car? What kind of guy do you think I am?"

Her cheeks, which were already pink from the cold, burned brighter even as she said, "A normal one. Now, come on!"

The high school parking lot was basically a traffic jam of students trying to leave. Whether the cars held parents who had picked up their child or older students who had driven themselves, everyone was trying to get out at the same time and now it was backed up.

Jessica wouldn't be able to get out before he had to make it to practice anyway.

Even in the car, Jessica kissed him first. Ever since they'd messed around the day before she'd been even more affectionate than she normally was. Steve was fairly certain it was because she'd realized how much she liked it and was now willing to see what else she liked.

He was more than happy to let her learn.

There was nothing rushed about it and they couldn't do but so much in a crowded parking lot, but she still allowed him to kiss her neck. She didn't have to be worried about being caught by her mom or her brother this time.

Steve wasn't big on leaving marks on girls unless he was absolutely sure it was okay, but that was mostly because he was naturally gentle in everything he did. He never bit hard enough to bruise, and Jessica didn't seem the type to appreciate love marks. She would be embarrassed if she looked in the mirror and saw a hickey where Steve's mouth had once been. That probably had something to do with the fact that Dustin would tease her relentlessly if he saw it.

Jessica slid her hands beneath his jacket and a little way beneath his shirt, enough so he could feel the chill from her fingertips right near the waist of his jeans. There was nothing sexual about it – she was just trying to get her hands warm.

"You really are freezing," he said, voice hushed against her neck. "Turn the heat on."

She hadn't even started the car.

"I prefer warming up this way."

He grinned against her skin and went back to teasing the spot right below her ear. By the time he had to leave for practice they were both more than warm.

---

In the locker room, while Steve and the rest of his team were getting



changed, all Steve heard about was the party Tina would be hosting on Friday. It was mostly about how great it was going to be and how long it had been since Tina had thrown a party.

"I'm guessing you won't be there," Chris, one of the guys on his team, said. "You being with Jessica and all."

Chris was a pretty cool guy. He'd never given him or Jess a hard time. He wasn't like some of the others who seemed to not want anything to do with Steve now that he wasn't acting like he owned the school. He could no longer provide them with a social advantage so they no longer hung around him. At least he knew the ones who actually cared.

"Actually, we're going together after she gets off of work," he said.

Steve stuffed his regular clothes in his locker as he took his gym clothes out. He pulled his shorts on and fit the shirt over his head.

"That's not really her scene, though, is it?" And there was Tommy. He'd been benched the rest of the season, but he still had to attend every practice. "What'd you have to do to get her to go?"

Steve clenched his fists, reminding himself that he shouldn't take a swing just because Tommy had a problem with the way Steve chose to live his life now or with how Jess had always lived hers. Besides, Tommy's cheek still showed signs of their last fight.

"I didn't have to do anything, Tommy. We're going because we want to have fun."

"Hm. Like the fun you were having out in the parking lot? Is that the type of girl she is now? Not so golden anymore, is she?"

"Hey, stop bein' a dick," Chris said.

Chris was tall and thin, but he still looked as if he wanted to shove Tommy against the lockers. Chris was one of the ones that Jess had always danced with when she'd actually gone to parties before. He'd never tried to get her off to herself in an empty room at whatever house the party had been held. He'd never tried to get her to leave with him and had never plied her with alcohol to get her drunk in

hopes of changing her mind; he'd known where he stood with Jess and that was it. A no was a no. All he'd ever gotten from her was dancing and light flirting, and he'd respected that.

Chris was a good guy.

"I don't think I was talking to you," Tommy said.

"Nope, but you're still being a dick. We're all on the same team, and here you are trying to start stuff. Grow up, already!"

Chris slammed his locker door shut before leaving the other two there to deal with their drama.

---

Jessica had to be at work around the same time that Steve's practice ended. Jessica arrived at the theater at the same time as Jonathan that day and clocked in at the same time.

"Hey, so . . . I'm having a movie night this Saturday for the boys if everyone can come. You're more than welcome to stick around if you want. I'm gonna ask Nancy. Uh, Steve obviously. There will be food and soda, things like that."

"Uh . . ." Jonathan seemed caught off guard by her invitation. "The whole night?"

"Well, for the guys, yeah. They can stay. I figured you and Nancy could leave whenever y'all want."

"Oh. Okay. What kind of movies?"

"I was gonna let everyone pick one. So it'd be more of a movie day and night, really. Trust me, I'm going to need the whole day to recover after Tina's party Friday night."

Again Jonathan seemed surprised by her words.

"You mean you're going?"

"Yeah. Reluctantly. Steve wants to go. And . . . honestly, I never minded going to parties when he and I went without Tommy and

Carol, so it might not be so bad."

Jonathan sent her a thin but sincere smile. "Well, you sound less than enthused, but I hope you have fun."

She and Jonathan went their separate ways – he to do his janitorial duties, she to do her concession duties. Mondays didn't get busy until around eight, so mostly all she did was clean the counter and the popcorn and soda machines. That kept her busy for the first three hours of her shift.

During her last hour at work it started snowing. She didn't know exactly when because she hadn't noticed until she clocked out and went outside. It was dark and the white fluff was falling from the sky. It was already sticking to the roads. There probably wouldn't be school in the morning because the town hadn't yet replaced the salt they'd used to help Eleven back in November.

But that wasn't what Jessica was focused on, what she was so worried about. As soon as she'd stepped outside, she'd frozen. It was dark and cold and the snow looked so much like ash in the night that she'd immediately flashed back to her brief time in the Upside Down. Much like the time she'd talked about it with Steve, her heart began to race and her breathing became shallow. Unlike the time she'd been with Steve . . . Steve obviously wasn't there to help her focus on something else. Then again . . . she didn't need him to. Will's name popped in her head almost as soon as she'd started to feel panic.

If she was feeling out of sorts from the snow-that-reminded-her-of-ash, then how must Will be feeling?

"Jonathan!"

Her breathing still shallow, she rushed back inside knowing that this was around the time he'd be cleaning the bathrooms. She shouted for him when she reached the hallway the restrooms were located in. He came rushing out as soon as she'd yelled for him.

"What?" he said, his eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

"It's snowing."

"Okay." He waited for her to continue, but she didn't. "So?"

"It's like . . . It looks like *over there*."

"Over . . ."

"The Upside Down," she exclaimed. "I went out and I freaked out, and all I could think about was Will. Is your mom with him?"

Jonathan nodded.

"Well, call and check on him. I mean, I had a flashback, so she needs to know, in case –"

"Got it. Thanks for letting me know. Will doesn't like talking about it."

"Sure, I . . . yeah."

She followed Jonathan to the payphone near the entrance doors and stayed with him while he waited for his mom to answer. Once she did, Jessica watched as Jonathan frantically explained what had happened with her and that he wanted to make sure Will was okay.

"Tell her – tell her if he ever acts like he's not *here* she needs to make him remember that he's not . . . *there*. He has to come back to the present."

At least that had been what helped her. Steve had reminded her where she was and that he was with her.

"Tell him he's not alone."

Jonathan repeated to his mom everything Jessica had said, and as she waited for him to get through her panic began to settle in again. Even though she knew it was just snow, it didn't look like just snow to her.

It made her almost angry. Snow was a normal, natural thing, and yet . . . it was also causing her to have a panic attack. How could something so simple make her remember – and freak out – about something that had happened over two months ago? She had been there for fifteen minutes, unlike Will, who had been there for a week.

She totally understood why he'd be having a hard time, but she hated that she was too.

Once Jonathan was off the phone, he turned to her and said, "Mom said he's okay. He went pale when he noticed the snow, but he just closed all the curtains and wouldn't look outside. He, uh . . . avoided it, I guess."

"Oh. I – I have to drive home, I –"

Jonathan handed her the receiver and then shoved a quarter into the little slot in the payphone.

"Call Steve."

---

Steve was in the middle of his history homework – which basically meant he was trying to concentrate on reading the very boring material in the textbook – when he heard the phone ring. He had his own number and line in his room, mostly so he wouldn't disturb his dad when his parents were home, which they were at the moment.

"Yeah," he said, finger on the page he'd been reading so he wouldn't lose his place.

"Steve, I need you to come get me."

It was Jessica, and something was really wrong with her voice. Thick with emotion, but small like a child's – not her normal voice at all.

"What's wrong? Where are you?"

"I'm at work. It's . . . snowing, Steve. I can't drive in the snow."

"I, uh – yeah. I'll be there soon. Give me like, ten minutes." Steve closed his history book. "Are you alone?"

"No, I'm – Jonathan's with me."

"Okay. Well, stay with him. You don't – you don't sound like yourself."

"Okay. See you soon."

All he heard was the resounding click as she hung up on him. He was confused, to say the least. Jessica had never once asked him for a ride to or from work, and she'd sounded scared. What did her fear have to do with the snow, though?

He put all his homework in his bag so he could work on it once he got Jessica home. There was no way he was leaving her alone if she was as afraid as she'd sounded.

Of course, the night he needed to go out was the night one of his parents wanted to know where he was going. They did check in once in a while. He assumed that's what they thought being parents meant. Steve actually thought that his parents had decided to have him because it had been expected of them to have a kid, not because they really wanted a kid.

"Where are you going at this late hour, Steve?" his mother, who was seated on the couch in the living room, asked as he grabbed his car keys from the coffee table.

"Uh, Jess needs a ride home from work. She said she can't drive in the snow."

"Oh. Are you staying with her for a while? You're taking your school things."

"I was in the middle of homework when she called."

"Be careful. The roads could freeze."

"I can crash on the Henderson's couch if it gets too bad."

"Of course."

Steve reached the front door, but his mom called him back before he could open it.

"Mom, Jess is waiting . . ."

"She can wait a few minutes more. I have something I need to say."

Steve waited, a list of awful things flying through his head before his mom started speaking again.

"I know your father and I are almost never here, and even when we are, we're not here for you. I've never put you first like a mother should with her children. I've always been more concerned with what your father's been doing with which woman that isn't me. It's not fair to you. It probably won't change, but it still isn't fair."

Steve didn't know what to say to his mother. Everything she'd said was true. As it was, he just stood there gripping his car keys tightly in his right hand and waiting for her to give him leave to go.

"I've always liked Jessica. She's been there for you ever since you became friends. I was so afraid you were going to push her away when you started high school and your image became the most important thing to you. By all rights, she could have forgotten you and no one would have blamed her."

"Mom –"

"You're better now," she cut him off. "Jessica is a good girl, and she's yours now." A sad smile fell over his mom's face. "I think she always has been. She is yours to take care of, so you take care of her. Okay? You never, ever make her think that she's not good enough for you."

"Mom . . ." This time when he called to her it wasn't with impatience. His throat had tightened and there was a burning behind his eyes. His mom had never talked to him like this and it probably wouldn't happen again, but he knew – had always known – how his father's actions hurt his mother.

"I don't *ever* want to hear or see you treating her the way your father treats me."

"Of course I won't," he said.

"Good. Go, then. Don't keep her waiting because of me."

---

It was almost ten when Steve finally got to the theater. Both Jonathan and Jessica were waiting for him near the entrance.

Jessica's face was pale but blotchy – she'd been crying. She was also staring out at the snow as if she was lost in it. He still didn't know what she was so frightened of, but he did know the last time he'd seen her so frightened was when they'd come up against that monster in November.

"What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong with the snow?"

"It reminds her of the other place," Jonathan answered.

Jessica was still just standing there looking outside. She wasn't shaking and her breathing was normal, but she hadn't reacted when he'd come into the theater. That wasn't normal for her. She was just staring out into the night, as if she were waiting for something to come out of it.

"Jess?" he said, stepping in front of her. "There's nothing out there."

"Mm-hm." She was responding on autopilot.

"How long has she –"

"After talking to you she became almost non-responsive."

"Jeeze. Um . . ."

Steve had no clue what to do. If she was in some form of shock, he knew he should get her something to boost her sugar – soda or chocolate or something.

"Get her a coke or something," he said to Jonathan. "I'll stay with her. I'm not even gonna try to move her while she's like this."

Jonathan took off towards the concession counter, where Bill, the boss, was looking in Jess's direction. Steve guessed that since she was off the clock that Bill thought it was okay not to worry about her, or maybe he'd known Jonathan had it handled.

"Jess? Do you know where you are?"

"I'm at work. I'm –"



Steve began rubbing up and down her arms in a way that was meant to be soothing, and it seemed to work for the most part. She began looking at him, at least, and was no longer staring into space.

"I wasn't expecting . . . the snow. It reminded me of the ashy stuff floating in the air over there."

Jessica didn't like talking about her time in the Upside Down for this specific reason. It usually made her panic. Steve knew not to try to make her talk about it. She was usually fine – aside from a few leftover nightmares – as long as she wasn't reminded of it.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. Mom caught me leaving."

"You get in trouble?" Jessica asked, sounding more like herself.

"No, but she knows where I'll be if I don't make it back tonight."

"Oh. Steve . . . I wanna go home."

"I'm gonna getcha home. Jonathan's getting you a Coke. You need to drink it."

"Okay."

She leaned towards him and he moved his hands from her arms so he could wrap his around her. He held her to him and could feel the slight tremors going through her body. They hadn't been great enough to see.

"You're okay," he told her.

"I know. I just feel so stupid. It's just snow." She looked up at him. "When I went outside, I thought for a second that . . ."

"That you were back over there?"

Jessica shook her head, but then she shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. But I was also scared that it had come here, that our world had turned into that one. It's . . . it's stupid."

"Not stupid," Steve contradicted as Jonathan brought them a small

coke and a box of M&Ms. "Thanks."

Jonathan nodded. "I still have another hour before we close. Are you guys good?"

Jessica began guzzling the drink as Steve took the chocolate. He nodded at Jonathan, letting him know he could get back to work, and then began leading Jessica outside and to his car. The snow hadn't slowed at all, but vision still wasn't a problem.

Jessica was stiff as she got into his car, and Steve wondered if her problem was the snow or how she felt about it. She had said it was stupid, her reaction, even though Steve thought it was probably normal. Especially if the snow really did remind her of the Upside Down.

The ride to Jessica's house was mostly filled with silence – Jess had turned the radio on, but it was on so low it was background noise. She finished her drink and started on the M&Ms before they made it to her house.

It wasn't until she got out and gathered his things that she seemed to notice he'd even brought anything with them. To be fair, his stuff had been in the backseat.

"You brought homework?"

"I was in the middle of it when you called, and I wasn't just going to leave you, so . . ."

Besides, Jessica probably still had homework, too, so that would help take her mind off of it.

## 16. Chapter 16

### Chapter Sixteen

"What'd you get for number nine?" Steve asked.

Jessica and Steve had been spread out on the living room floor for almost an hour. Steve had finished his history homework and they were both doing math now. Well, Jessica was. Steve was having trouble with the fact that the alphabet represented numbers now. He'd had trouble with math from the time the started learning algebra in ninth grade.

"Steve, there's no solution. The variables don't match, so you can't do anything with them."

"Why would they make you try to find a solution to a problem that doesn't have one?"

"Because school is meant to drive you crazy."

Math wasn't the problem, though, not really. Steve just couldn't focus. He wanted to fidget and mess with everything. He'd used up his concentration quota by actually reading the history chapter he'd been assigned. All he wanted to do now was tap the tip of his pencil against his notebook.

When they'd gotten to the house Jessica had still been a little pale, and her mother had noticed, but she'd believed her when Jessica had said she just wasn't feeling well. It made sense, because why else would Steve had picked her up from work? That had never happened before.

Dustin had already been in bed, so he hadn't even been aware of Jessica coming home late. Now her mom was in bed as well, and Jessica and Steve were on their own.

She felt fine now. She'd closed the curtain and was focused on helping Steve with the math homework. He seemed to be filled with nervous energy, though, and she knew she was partly to blame

because of her freak out earlier. He'd been so good about it, so sure when he was there for her, helping her, that she hadn't really thought about how worried it had made him.

He was always right there when she needed him, and he didn't even complain about it. She'd called him that night and he'd come running, no questions asked. Most people wouldn't have done that.

"Hey, Steve?" She dropped her pencil down into the crease of her Algebra book.

"Hm?"

She grabbed his hand to stop him from fiddling with his pencil.

"You know I love you, right?"

If she hadn't already stopped his hand from moving, he would have stopped himself. His entire body froze – not in a bad way, not like he was rejecting her words. More like he was just finding it hard to accept what she'd said. She'd said them before, that she loved him, but they weighed more now, because they – she and Steve – meant more now. Steve seemed to sense that.

"I mean that in the way that my life is better with you in it, and I feel like . . . I don't even want to know what it would be like without you. I am one hundred percent in this, and –"

Steve's lips were on hers then, firm but not rough, and his hands were cupping her face, and hers were in his hair. It was soft and thick. When she scraped his nails across his scalp Steve surprised her by letting out a moan. It was the same reaction he got from her when he kissed her neck.

"Maybe I should play with your hair more often," she teased breathlessly. "You, uh, seem to like that."

"Jess, I love you too," he said, rushed. "I, uh . . . I couldn't risk being the first one to say it."

"Were you afraid that I wouldn't say it back?" She was mostly teasing.

"Maybe," he admitted. "Or that if I said it first, then you might feel like you had to say it back."

"Well, I said it first, so . . ."

She kissed him once more, this one soft and lingering, but that was it. There hadn't been a huge declaration or fan fare behind it, but the words had been said and the words were true and, now that they'd been spoken, neither of them had to be afraid to say them again.

---

Steve stayed the night – why wouldn't he since his mom already knew where he was and he didn't care what his dad thought – and he and Jess went to bed together. Despite her earlier anxiety, she fell asleep quickly. She had basically plopped down, curled up against him, and was then out like a light.

It was after one because they'd finished their homework even though Steve was almost completely certain they weren't going to school. Snow had fallen and built up on the streets, and the cleaning crew hadn't been out to clear them yet.

It wasn't long after they went to bed that Steve heard something from outside and saw as lights came through the bedroom window. Being a small town, there usually wasn't anyone out and about at that time of night, and Steve knew it wasn't a snow plow. He made to get up, but Jessica's hand had clenched into a fist around his shirt. She obviously wasn't sleeping as deeply as she appeared to be.

He massaged her hand to loosen her grip and then got up to look out the window. He really wanted to know what the lights and noise were about. It ended up being Hopper in his truck. He'd connected Jessica's car to the back of his truck and had towed it to the house.

Steve wondered if Jonathan had called him or if Jess's boss had. Either way, Hop looked up at Jessica's window – probably because the light was on. Jess still had trouble sleeping in the dark – and threw a half-hearted salute this way.

Steve didn't try to hide the fact that he was in the room. His car was in the driveway, so Hop already knew he was there, and he wouldn't

care anyway.

Steve lifted his hand in a slight wave before turning to go back to bed.

There was a creak from outside the room, and then, "Jess, why is –"

Dustin was just coming into Steve's line of sight, and when he saw Steve standing there and Jessica sleeping, he stopped talking to her and then focused on Steve. His voice was softer when he continued.

"What happened to the car? Why's Hopper bringing it here?"

"Jess had a bad night, little dude."

Dustin's eyes darted towards his sleeping sister again, as if he were checking her over for physical signs of distress. Steve thought it was sweet that Dustin had known exactly what he'd been talking about.

"Is she okay now?"

"I think so. It wasn't like last time. Or not when I got there."

"That why you stayed?"

"Yup."

That was all. Dustin, still tired and sleepy-eyed, went back to his room, and Steve climbed back into bed beside Jessica.

---

Jessica's head was throbbing when she woke up, and the brightness coming from the window didn't help at all. She looked at her clock, which read 9:00. She hadn't set the alarm the night before because she'd been fairly certain that there would be no school. Considering her mother hadn't woken her up, Jessica assumed she'd been right.

Jessica turned over to face Steve, who was still there and sleeping, and moved closer to him. He was on his stomach, face pressed firmly against the pillow. His arms had wrapped around the pillow, and she suddenly became jealous of it.

At some point, Steve had taken his shirt off. She began rubbing his back, no intention of fully waking him but of making him aware enough to listen to her.

All she got was a 'Hm?' in response.

"You're too far away."

"M right here."

"Mm-mm."

She poked the arm closest to her. He got the hint, apparently, because he flipped to his side and lifted his arm enough for her to slip under it. By the time she got comfortable, their bodies were so close they were sharing warmth.

"Better?"

"Mm-hm. Go back to sleep."

"Yup."

Jessica went back to sleep, too, after listening to Steve breathe for a few minutes. When she woke up the second time, it was still bright and her head was still hurting. Steve was still with her, and he was awake too. She didn't know if he had woken her up or not, but he was playing with her hair. It was sending little tingles down her spine.

"Time is it?" she asked.

"Almost noon."

Jessica groaned and then stretched. She didn't usually sleep so late. Steve, however, could sleep whenever and wherever, for however long he wanted. Or at least he'd been able to do that before all the Upside Down nonsense.

"My head hurts."

"Not that I'm an expert, but you're probably dehydrated."

"Mm. We should get up and get dressed."

"No . . ." he whined. He guided her head back so they could face each other. Neither one of them cared about morning breath as their lips touched.

The kiss was more a good morning than anything else and it was over in seconds.

"Is it bad that I'm already at the point of loving waking up next to you?" she asked.

"No. I love falling asleep next to you," Steve admitted. "Speaking of which, Hopper brought your car back while you were sleeping."

"Oh." She hadn't expected that. "Good."

She got up, Steve's arms and hands trailing after her, and went to the window. It had stopped snowing sometime during the night, but the ground was still covered. Her car had a light dusting over it, so it obviously hadn't snowed for long after Hopper had dropped it off.

"Everything is so bright."

The sun reflecting off the snow actually hurt her eyes if she stared too long, so she turned back towards Steve, who was still lying down and looking at her. He had a lazy smile on his face.

"What?"

"Nothin'. You're beautiful, that's all."

Jessica did not duck her head, but she did blush as a grin pulled at her lips. She walked to the bed, plopped back down beside him and kissed him again.

"You are very sweet, Steve Harrington." Another kiss. "I love you."

"Mm." He kissed her this time, longer and sweeter. "I love you too."

---

Once Steve and Jessica were up for good, they went downstairs.



Dustin and her mom were watching TV. Well, Dustin was watching TV. Her mom was knitting.

"Finally, you're up," Dustin teased. "I wanna build a snowman. I wanted to build one with the guys, but the roads aren't clear, so I can't ride over there."

"Okay," Jessica agreed. "Let us eat first, though, okay?"

"Deal."

In the kitchen, Jessica went about making sandwiches, and then she and Steve began to eat in comfortable silence. Jessica couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so content. She'd been able to sleep in next to Steve. She'd had morning snuggles with him, and he'd enjoyed them too. Well, he liked snuggling, anyway, and would use any excuse to do it, so it worked.

But Steve made her think about and feel things she never had before. Maybe it was because he was so good to her or maybe it was because she'd been a little bit in love with him since the beginning of high school, but when she thought about him it made her think about the future. Things like studying more together and going to the same college – or at least ones close to each other – maybe even getting a place off-campus together if they did go to the same school.

"What're you think' about?" Steve asked, hushed.

"Nothin'. Just us and . . . next year and then college the year after."

They were still eating and Steve had been about to take a bite, but he put the sandwich back on his plate. He looked as he had the night before when she'd admitted she loved him.

"You think we'll still be together in two years?"

"Part of me belongs to you, Steve Harrington, and has since I met you. Two years isn't a long time for me."

Jessica watched as Steve's Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed his emotion back.

"Since you met me?"

"Mm-hm."

"Wow, have I been an idiot."

She grinned. "Well . . ." She shrugged. "You're a guy. I guess I can't hold it against you."

"Thank God."

She leaned forward, kissed him quickly, and then went back to eating.

---

As promised, Steve and Jessica went out with Dustin to help him build a snowman. They all bundled up to keep warm, but Steve could tell Jessica wanted to go back inside within the first few minutes. She stuck it out, though, so she could help out.

They got through making the first snowball before Dustin flung a handful of snow at Jessica's face.

"Hey!"

She hadn't had any problem coming outside, other than a small complaint about how cold it was. Steve assumed it was because snow wasn't actually falling and because it wasn't dark anymore.

Steve laughed as Jessica threw a whole mess of slush back at her brother, one right after another, making Dustin fall backwards onto the ground when he tried to get away.

"Hey, I only threw one at you! I only threw one!"

"Yeah, and I'm not giving you a chance to throw another one."

Steve filled his hands with snow as well and calmly made his way to his girlfriend.

"I dunno, that doesn't seem fair, Jess."

She stopped what she was doing and looked his way. Her cheeks were pink from the cold – the tip of her nose was too. When she noticed his intentions, she took a running stance. She was about to take off.

"No, Steve, you love me . . . that's not allowed."

"Oh, it's because I love you that it's allowed."

So she ran. Steve tossed the snow at her back, not really aiming for her, and began chasing her. Jessica was fast even if she wasn't athletic. Steve, however, was faster. He caught her around the waist and brought her smoothly and gently to the snow-covered ground.

"Dude, I got her," he called to Dustin, who had followed after them.

"Hey, two against one! I call foul or penalty or whatever. Unnecessary roughness!"

Jessica began laughing even through her terrible referee talk.

"Which sport are you calling shots for?" Steve laughed along with her as Dustin shoved snow down the top of her coat.

"That's for bombarding me," Dustin screamed in delight. Then he threw another ball of snow at Steve. "That's for tackling my sister."

Dustin started running then. Apparently, Steve was meant to spend his life chasing after the Henderson siblings.

He was okay with that.

---

Jessica, Dustin, and Steve were outside for maybe thirty minutes and they only got two parts of the snowman done. They would have to finish it later. At the moment, they were seated at the kitchen table waiting for hot chocolate that Ms. Henderson was making. They had changed into warm, dry clothes as soon as they'd come in – or Jessica had. Neither Steve nor Dustin were as cold or wet.

Jessica had scooted her chair right next to Steve's and he now had her hands folded into his to get them warm again. If they hadn't had

so much fun, Steve would have felt bad about pinning her to the ground while Dustin basically covered her with snow.

Jessica only removed her hands from his when her mom brought her a steaming mug of hot chocolate.

"First cup is for the Snow Queen," Ms. Henderson said. She'd obviously seen the very unfair snow fight.

Steve watched as Jessica wrapped her hands around the mug and closed her eyes before taking a sip. He knew it had to be scalding hot, but she smiled and hummed at the taste anyway.

Ms. Henderson brought Steve's drink along with Dustin's. He had to admit that the warmth coming off the mug as he gripped it did feel amazing.

"Want the little marshmallows?"

"Of course," Dustin said.

Ms. Henderson pulled them out of one of the cabinets and tossed them onto the table. Jessica didn't want any marshmallows, and Steve took only a few. Dustin, however, put as many as he could fit without overflowing his cup. He was working towards a sugar high.

Steve wasn't sure he wanted to be a witness to that, and it turned out that he didn't have to worry about it. The roads were cleared and, after they finished making their snowman, Steve was able to make it home.

---

School was back in session the next day, though it did open two hours late. Nothing eventful happened during class – it was mostly a review of what they'd learned on Monday – and after school Jessica had to work.

Jonathan worked almost every day, and he was working the same shift as Jessica that day. That was what gave her an idea that would be brilliant for Friday if Jonathan agreed to what she wanted to do.

"Hey, Jonathan, you know that party I said I was going to Friday?"

"Yes . . ." His answer was hesitant, as if he thought she was going to talk about something unpleasant.

"Would you mind switching shifts with me? I work yours tomorrow and you work mine Friday?"

He looked relieved. "Sure. For a minute there I thought you were going to invite me."

She laughed. "I know you'd say no if I did that. Anyway, thanks. It's just Steve has a game Friday night and it would be easier to just leave with him from there than to have him pick me up at home."

"I get it. It's fine. He'll be happy you came to a game anyway."

"That's the plan."

"Meet me after your shift and I'll show you what I have to do tomorrow."

Jonathan did mostly janitorial stuff, so she knew basically what he did, she just didn't know the order in which he did it. It shouldn't be too hard.

## 17. Chapter 17

### Chapter Seventeen

"Thanks for picking me up, Nance," Jessica said as she plopped onto the passenger side seat. "Steve still doesn't know I'm coming."

"He's gonna be super happy you're there."

"Yup."

She didn't want to go into details with Nancy about Steve. Even though Nancy hadn't been with him that long she had still been with him, so it would be weird talking about him with her.

"So, are you staying for the game?"

"Mm-mm. Mike's been going through some stuff. He's been going into the basement every night trying to contact El."

"I knew that."

"He's been getting in trouble, too, though."

Jessica had not known that part. Dustin hadn't said anything and Mike hadn't either. He obviously didn't want her help with this.

"So . . . how are you and Jonathan doing?"

"Uh . . . we're not . . . I mean, we talk a little, but that's it. He's honestly been more worried about Will and his mom, which is understandable. He talks about them and asks about Mike and all, but we don't really talk about anything else."

"Those are important things to talk about, though."

"Yeah, they are. I feel like I don't want to get into anything right now."

"Valid lifestyle choice," Jessica said.

Nancy smiled and then turned the question around. "What about you and Steve?"

"Uh-uh," Jessica said and laughed. "You're his ex. It would be weird."

"Not unless you make it weird. I mean, I was with him for maybe three weeks. We parted on good terms. I knew he was in love with you. I knew he thought he never had a chance with you and was trying to move on with me."

Jessica didn't know what to do with that. She'd been so worried that she was going to lose Steve to Nancy when he'd been with her, and now she was learning that he'd been in love with her the whole time.

"Well, we're good. I'm . . . he's great. He's good to me. That's all that matters, really, but we have fun together too. Dustin is beginning to like him and trust him."

Nancy nodded. "Good. Um . . . I overheard Dustin telling the others that Steve spends . . . a lot of time at your house."

Jessica grinned. "You mean he spends the night a lot."

Nancy shrugged but stayed silent.

"It's okay, Nancy. It's not such a big deal. I mean, not in the way you're thinking. Mom knows he's there. It's not like he sneaks in. He stays over and we leave the door open. Nothing happens."

"Oh." Nancy let out a quiet laugh. "For a minute there I thought maybe your mom was just letting you guys . . ."

"No!" Jessica laughed with her. "My mom lets me have a lot of freedom, but she draws the line at that. Like, he's allowed to sleep over whenever he wants – we're even freeing up the guest room for him so he can always have a place to put his stuff – but I am not allowed to sleep over at his place."

Her mom had never specified that she couldn't, but the whole point of Steve staying over was because he almost always had the house to himself. She never even thought to try to ask if she could stay at his place. Her mother would know they would be alone, most likely, and

if they had to keep the door open when he stayed over, that implied she was not okay with them moving to the next level of their relationship.

"So you guys haven't –"

"No." For some reason, Jessica felt she had to explain why. "Steve told me he made a lot of mistakes with you, and he doesn't want to make them with me. He's been very good about it. He's my first boyfriend and my first kiss that actually meant something. He's being careful."

And she loved him for it. As much as she loved being kissed and touched by Steve Harrington, no matter how hot and bothered she got by those things, she knew she was not ready to be with him. She couldn't even imagine undressing in front of him yet, let alone being completely bare and vulnerable like that. She didn't think she would know what to do with a bare and vulnerable Steve, either.

Well, she would know what to do, she just wouldn't be ready to do it yet.

"We haven't even discussed it really. He's just . . . happy with how we are right now."

Nancy smiled. "I'm glad. You guys are good together."

---

The school parking lot was packed when they got there. It was a good thing Nancy was just dropping her off because they may not have been able to find a parking space.

"Thanks again, Nancy. See you tomorrow."

Nancy had committed to coming to their movie night, so Jessica was holding her to it. Jonathan would be there as well. Neither Nancy nor Jonathan were planning on staying the night, but they were going to be there pretty late.

Jessica had to squeeze through the claustrophobia-causing crowd once she reached the gym doors – mostly because some people wouldn't move from the opening. Everyone was so tightly packed together and it was so loud that Jessica's tension levels automatically



went up. This was exactly why she didn't go to the sporting events in school. There was too much going on at once and it drove her crazy.

Steve knew that, which was why he never bugged her about missing games. Also, she was usually working, so that was also a factor.

In the spring, when baseball started, Jessica was more likely to turn up at a game. It was outside and not as crowded or as loud. Some of the games were on the weekends, too, so it was easier to get to them schedule-wise.

As she entered the gym, she headed to the entrance to the boys' locker room. She didn't go in, obviously, but she knew Steve was usually the first one out, so she decided to just wait for him there.

She would have just found a seat on the bleachers, but if Steve saw her in the middle of the game, his jaw would probably drop and he'd mess up whatever play he was in the middle of, and she didn't want that.

Even over the noise of the crowd Jessica heard the coach tell the boys in the locker room to hurry it up. The coach came out first, stopped short when he saw Jessica. Even he knew she didn't come to the games.

The coach was also the gym teacher. He knew how Jessica felt about anything even remotely sports-related.

"You're not here to distract my boy, are you?" he asked, though he wasn't being offensive in the slightest. He was actually teasing her.

"No. Just . . . being supportive."

"They're all decent," he said. "You can wait in the hall, catch him before he comes out here. Keep it quick, though."

Jessica smiled. "Thanks, Coach."

The hallway leading into the locker room was long enough that the team could line up single file before going into the gym. They were just now lining up. Steve was in front, but he was not the first one to see her.

A few whistles and cat calls aimed her way was what made Steve look. He actually did a double take, like he hadn't believed it was her the first time. She grinned even as she blushed from the attention she was receiving. She hadn't wanted to cause a scene, but she'd known she would, seeing as she was in the hallway of the boys' locker room.

"Hey," she said, stopping in front of Steve. "I, uh . . . Jonathan is covering my shift so I can be here."

Steve's smile was lighting up his whole face. It was beautiful.

"You hate basketball," he said.

"Yeah, but you don't. I'm being a supportive girlfriend."

Steve's teammates were staring at them as if they'd never seen a couple who were happy together.

"Uh . . . Coach said to make it quick, so . . ."

"Right." Steve gestured for the rest of the players to go on ahead. "You heard her. Make it quick."

The guys went by them, most smirking or outright grinning, and then there was Tommy, who was obviously still bitter about being benched. He was decidedly not grinning or smirking. He actually looked resentful.

"Keep moving, Tommy," Chris said from behind him.

Jessica sent him a thankful smile. He'd always been good to her.

Steve's lips were on hers as soon as they were alone. Her back hit the wall as he backed her into it, and then she felt his hands on her waist. He squeezed his fingers against her in a way that made her gasp. He took advantage by slipping his tongue past her lips to slide against her own.

She placed her hands over his chest and shoved half-heartedly against him.

"Steve . . . I promised I wouldn't distract you."

He kissed her cheek, her jaw, her neck.

"I'm not distracted. I . . . am totally . . . focused." He kissed her again between words.

"Not on the game."

Steve stopped kissing her but continued holding onto her.

"Okay, okay. I'm just glad you're here. I know you don't like the crowd and the noise. I thought I was supposed to pick you up after, but this is so much better."

He squeezed against her waist again.

"You look great."

"Thanks."

She'd chosen the same tight, black, long-sleeved shirt she'd worn on their date. He'd eyed her appreciatively when he'd seen her in it, so she knew he liked it on her. She was wearing black leggings also, because it was freezing, but a neon pink twirly skirt was over them and it reached to about midthigh. The skirt had frills and layers; it was probably the most girly piece of clothing she owned.

Since they were going to be dancing later, she'd chosen to wear flats rather than boots or heels. Plus, the gym floor was not a good place for walking in shoes that didn't have traction.

Her jacket of choice had been her leather one – her favorite thing in her closet.

She gave Steve one last lingering kiss before gesturing for him to go. She didn't want to get him in trouble.

---

Steve was almost deliriously happy that Jessica had come to the game. He knew how tense the loud noise and the crowd made her, how it could make her shoulders draw up against her ears until she was able to leave. It was one of the reasons she didn't go to a lot of parties, and yet she was doing both that night. He knew it was for

him – especially the basketball game – so he'd have to find a way to make it up to her later.

Steve did not play better or harder just because Jessica was there – this wasn't a movie. He did, however, have something to look at between plays. Jessica didn't seem miserable to be there, at least. She was smiling and applauding with everyone else. Steve knew, though, that she was probably hating being in the middle of the crowd.

Steve wasn't an aggressive player by nature. He just tried to find the best way to get the ball into the net. That usually didn't involve knocking people over. He wasn't the only one on the team who thought that way, but he was one of the few. He let the others be aggressive; he just got the ball where it was supposed to be.

Steve's main advantage was that he was fast. His reflexes were sharp, definitely on point, and he had a strategic mindset. He knew how to make a plan and then execute it. It was something he was very good at.

His team ended up winning by only a few points, but it was still a win. The team went crazy and so did the crowd. It had been a good game.

As soon as Steve could get out of the huddle his teammates had made, he went to Jessica, who had made it down to the floor. He swept her into his arms even though she fussed about him being all sweaty. She still giggled when he tugged her close.

"I brought my clothes so I could shower and change here. Do you mind waiting?"

"No, go ahead."

Steve left her with the group of girls she'd been sitting with during the game. Not everyone stayed to shower, so it didn't take long for him to get done. He wouldn't have taken long, anyway, because he didn't know how long Jessica's group was planning on staying and he didn't trust Tommy not to start anything if he found her alone.

As much as Steve hated to leave his hair undone, he never did his

hair in the locker room. He'd never live it down if he did.

---

Jessica's group stayed with her until Steve came back. They'd talked about the game the whole time and she hadn't really followed, but she was glad they hadn't just left her.

Steve came out of the locker room wearing a red sweater, blue jeans, and Nikes. His hair was parted the way it normally was, but it hung down rather than being coiffed. He still looked amazing.

This time she was the one who hugged him when he reached her. He was sweat-free and fresh from the shower, his hair still a little wet.

"Congratulations," she said. "On the win."

"Eh," he shrugged. "Wasn't just me."

"Yeah, but I only came for you."

She tugged at his arm, which had his personalized Hawkins High sweatshirt slung over it. Once they reached the exit and went outside the cold hit Jessica enough to make her shiver, so she leaned even more into Steve than she had been.

"Steve . . ." she whined playfully. "It's so cold."

"It is." He slipped his arm beneath her jacket and around her waist to share his warmth with her, which she appreciated. "You want my sweatshirt?"

"I'll be fine when we get to the car. Plus, it'll clash with my skirt."

As predicted, she was fine. Steve turned the heat on, and she was warm within a minute. She hated Steve's car, though, because it was so hard to get close to him in the front seat. Sure, she could kiss him, but she couldn't get right up next to him like she wanted to.

"So, are we just gonna crash at Tina's, or . . ."

She didn't know if Steve planned on drinking, but if he did, he definitely was not driving them home, and she kind of wanted to

drink at least a little, enough to where she felt loose and giggly.

"If you want to. There will be plenty of room."

That was true. Not only did Tina have a huge house, but most of the people there would choose not to stay even if they were falling over drunk.

"Are you gonna do the keg stand tonight?"

Steve shrugged. Jessica didn't mind if he did want to. Steve could handle his alcohol, and he was never a mean drunk. He was actually goofy and lovable – even more so than usual. She didn't understand how he could just chug and chug like he did, but he could.

"If you're drinking, I think I should watch out for you."

"I'm only drinking enough to take the edge off. I'm not getting drunk. Tippy me can handle drunk you. So we'll crash there. Mom already knows I probably won't be back tonight."

---

It was close to ten when Steve and Jessica pulled up to Tina's house. It was a large ranch-style house with a wrap-around porch. The driveway was a dirt road, trees on either side. A field was behind the house. Jessica would always go out and look at the stars if it was warm and Tina was throwing a party. It was sort of a place for Jessica to escape to when the noise and crowd got to be too much inside.

Some people were parked in the back because there wasn't enough room in the front and, despite the cold, some of the people were hanging out on the porch rather than going inside. Steve and Jessica went straight inside, where the rest of the team greeted them. Most of them were already on their way to being drunk. A few people were crowding the bottom of the stairs and some were even on them.

The girls Jessica had been sitting with at the game flocked toward them. There were only four of them, but they tried to drag Jessica back into the mass of people and to the punch bowl. She went willingly enough and Steve followed her.

The punch was a dark red, and once Jessica got a cup of it, she sipped it first before taking a larger swallow. She had been testing just how much alcohol was in the punch. It must have been to her satisfaction because she didn't make a face at the taste, and Steve had seen her make a few before when someone had made the punch way too strong.

Suddenly music began playing. It had been at a bearable level so people could talk over it; now they would have to yell to be heard. Jessica would get tired of that very quickly, at least until she'd had a few drinks.

They were soon ushered outside, though, where most of the jocks were now around one of the kegs that had somehow found its way to Tina's backyard. Once people began noticing they'd come outside, everyone began chanting Steve's name. They knew he was about to do a keg stand, because that was what he did at parties.

A few of Steve's teammates helped hold his legs up when he went into a handstand. Steve controlled the hose. He'd learned his lesson about that after only one mishap when he let someone else control the flow of alcohol being squirted into his mouth.

He lasted thirty-five seconds before kicking his leg gently to let the ones holding him up know he was done. He could hold his alcohol, which was something he prided himself in, and he didn't even feel dizzy or nauseated when he was back on his feet.

The people around him were shouting their praises. Jessica, however, was playfully rolling her eyes. She was also smiling at him. The grin he gave back was wide and open. He was feeling a buzz already, but it had nothing to do with the beer he'd consumed. This had everything to do with the fact that he was at a party with Jessica. This was their first party as a couple, and they were going to have fun.

He wrapped his arms around Jessica when he reached her, but he refrained from kissing her because he knew she despised the taste of beer.

"You get that out of your system?" she teased.

"I'm good for the night."

He'd never done more than one keg stand in a night. He was known for being able to handle his alcohol, not for getting blackout drunk. Besides, Jess still had more than half of her drink left. He didn't want to outpace her by too much.

Jessica grabbed his hand, then, and began dragging him back toward the door.

"Come on, I wanna dance."

Steve knew she wouldn't really let loose and move with the beat until she'd had a few cups of punch, but she loved music, so he followed her anyway. Besides, dancing was mostly just bouncing around in place, especially at a party as crowded as this one.

---

One hour and two cups of punch later, Jessica was finally feeling the amount of tipsy she had planned on feeling in the first place. She felt warm and her body was loose. She smiled and laughed easier this way than when she was sober, which was why she didn't drink a lot; she could easily become addicted to the feeling that came with drinking, and she didn't want that.

The thing was that Jessica had never had a boyfriend while being tipsy, and it made her clingier than she normally was. She wanted to be closer to Steve and she wasn't embarrassed to just fall into his lap when they were seated, she wasn't self-conscious about standing closer to him when they danced. Luckily, Steve liked her being closer.

She was working on her third cup, just sipping now. She and Steve were just sitting on the couch, his arm around her. She was playing with his fingers. Steve hadn't had anything else to drink since the keg, but he didn't seem to mind. He was just enjoying the party and her company. It was nice, and now that she had a buzz going, she was enjoying everything too.

The music wasn't as loud now and everything seemed more mellow. There was more than alcohol floating around – cigarettes and weed, nothing heavier – but she hadn't touched either. Steve hadn't either,



but Jessica thought that was only because she was there.

People started leaving around one, even the ones that shouldn't have been driving at all. It was also around one that Jessica began to fall asleep against Steve's shoulder. Naturally, Steve got up and began leading her to one of the guest rooms upstairs. They'd both been in Tina's house many times, so they knew where everything was.

It wasn't until Jessica almost tripped going up the stairs that she realized she'd maybe had one too many drinks. Her alcohol tolerance was apparently low. She was able to laugh at herself and didn't get mad when Steve laughed with her.

"Lightweight," he teased before just picking her up and carrying her the rest of the way.

"Hm." She was silent until they got to the room they were going to use. "I have to pee."

Steve made sure she was steady on her feet when he put her right way up and then she went a little down the hallway to the bathroom.

Steve waited in the hallway for Jessica to come back. He wasn't worried, exactly, but she had tripped coming up the stairs, so he wanted to make sure she was okay. It turned out that he had nothing to worry about. She was fine. She was missing her skirt, but she was fine.

They went into the room together and Steve pulled the sheets down to the bottom of the full-sized bed. He noticed that Jessica was now trying to push her leggings down to take them off, which would have been fine if she'd ever done that in front of him before, but she never had. She'd always changed in the bathroom, and she'd always had shorts to sleep in. She didn't have any for that night.

"Whoa, maybe you should leave those on."

She looked up at him, brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Uh . . . because we're not at your house."

"But we're going to bed . . ." Her voice had a whining lilt to it, kind of

like the one she had when she complained about it being cold.

"True. But . . . I think it would be best if you kept them on. For my sanity."

It took her a few seconds, but eventually a look of realization came across her face, which was already a little flushed from the alcohol, and the pink tint to her cheeks darkened.

"Oh. Okay."

"Yeah."

Now that they'd agreed she should definitely keep her pants on, they settled in the bed. She placed her head on his chest like she normally would. Steve trailed his fingers up and down her back until she went to sleep. All in all, Steve thought that the party had been a success. They both had had fun, and nothing bad had happened.

Steve thought that it was exactly what they'd needed.

## 18. Chapter 18

### Chapter Eighteen

The morning after the party, Jessica woke up with a slight headache. She hadn't had that much to drink, had she? Not enough to cause a hangover. She groaned when she opened her eyes.

"It's too bright," she complained and turned to push her face into her pillow to block out the light.

Steve, who was still sleeping beside her, began to stir and one of his arms ended up resting over her back.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice rough from sleep.

"No," she replied. "My head hurts."

"It happens." He began to pull her closer and she went willingly. "You probably just need some water."

Her mouth *was* dry.

"Mm. I also need the sun to not shine through the window."

Jessica placed her head on his chest, and he moved his hand from her back to her scalp and began massaging.

"That feels so good," she said. "You really are the best boyfriend."

His chest moved beneath her as he let out a huff of laughter. "It's kind of easy when I have the best girlfriend."

She smiled and hid her face against him. "You're pretty smooth, Steve Harrington."

"I try to be."

They continued to lie there for about ten minutes, Jessica falling between being awake and being barely awake. Steve continued playing with her hair and massaging her scalp, and if they had been

at her house and in her bed, she would've let herself fall back to sleep for real.

As it was, they probably needed to get up soon so they could get ready for their movie marathon day/night with the kids.

---

Once they were up, Jessica deciding to keep her skirt off since she still had her leggings on, they went downstairs. A lot of the people that had decided to stay the night were still there, most still sleeping, so they quietly collected their jackets and left.

"You want breakfast?" Steve asked. "You don't feel sick or anything?"

"Nope, no sickness. Yes to breakfast."

The ride to the diner was relatively quiet, and Steve didn't mind it. Jessica wasn't used to alcohol headaches. He reminded himself to make sure she got some water in her before she ate.

Their plan for the day was pretty simple. The kids were planning on spending half the day at the arcade. They would all go back to the Henderson household for dinner around five and then the movie marathon would start. It was supposed to last all night, but Steve thought it would probably end around two.

Now that Dustin seemed to like and trust him a bit more, Steve was actually a little excited for their movie night. Dustin still made those comments about their relationship, but it was more a friendly teasing than disapproving remarks. He knew Steve was not there to hurt his sister; he was willing to give Steve a chance.

He hadn't really hung out with the other kids. He knew Mike, of course, but the only impression Mike seemed to have of him was him sneaking into Nancy's bedroom through the window when they'd first gotten together. Unlike Dustin, who would've bawled him out over something like that, Mike had just rolled his eyes.

He hadn't spent much time with Lucas at all, and the only time he'd spent with Will was when he'd been in the hospital and that had only been the first night when Jessica had needed him there. He knew that

out of Dustin's friends, she liked Will the most because he was quiet and respectful and was the least likely to get into trouble.

Once at the diner, they ordered their food. Jessica wanted pancakes, while Steve ordered the special that came with eggs, bacon, and toast.

Each of the tables in the diner had a mini jukebox. Jessica picked a Michael Jackson song, and the music came on, softly so as not to disturb other people, and they waited for their food to arrive.

---

As they ate, bits and pieces of the night before came back to Jessica, and she almost laughed when she remembered she'd tripped going up the stairs.

"You had to carry me to the room last night," she suddenly said. "I didn't think I had drink that much, but . . . apparently I couldn't even walk upstairs."

Steve grinned and laughed along with her. "I didn't mind carrying you."

"I only had three cups, right? That's all I remember. It didn't taste like it had much alcohol in it, but I was obviously wrong."

She remembered getting ready for bed and that she'd tried taking her pants off. She also remembered that Steve hadn't let her. He hadn't taken advantage. If he hadn't said anything, she definitely would've taken them off, and he probably would've been miserable until falling asleep. He'd basically said as much.

She had a good boyfriend and a good best friend. It had taken him a while to get his act together, but he was making progress.

Once Jessica and Steve were done eating, they went to her house so they could pick Dustin up and take him to the arcade to meet up with the rest of the group. Jessica's head still hurt, but not as bad as it had when she'd first woken up. She'd had some water as Steve had suggested, and it had helped a little.

Dustin was already dressed and ready to go when they got to the

house, and as soon as they pulled into the driveway he was rushing out, a small bag of coins in his hand.

He threw himself into the backseat and gave them a cheerful greeting. One of Dustin's favorite things to do was go to the arcade – his name adorned the high score screen on many of the games, and he was always trying to top his best score and anyone else's that was above his.

"So . . ." Dustin said slyly, "what were you guys doing all night?"

Jessica groaned and turned to look at him. "Seriously?" She wasn't even mad; she knew Dustin was just teasing her and it wasn't like he used to tease. Now he'd accepted Steve as a part of their life, and he maybe even liked Steve now. Dustin was just doing what a younger brother was supposed to do.

"Dude, she tripped going up the stairs."

"Steve!"

"Well, you did," he said and grinned.

Dustin laughed loudly. "That's embarrassing."

"Only Steve saw, so it's okay."

Once they reached the arcade, Jessica gave Dustin a five-dollar bill that he could exchange for quarters inside. He had his own money, but he was going to be there for a while and she didn't know if the other guys would have enough to go around.

They waited in the car with Dustin until the others arrived and then she and Steve headed to the store to buy some snacks and sodas for their movie night. They had to wait to go to the video store so that the kids could each pick a movie, and they would pick up pizza for dinner on the way home.

"I'm watching Grease tonight," she said out of nowhere. "The kids are going to make me watch Star Wars and horror movies – watch and see if they don't – so I'm going to watch Grease."

"Okay," Steve said. Jessica knew he didn't mind her movie choice; he'd never watch it on his own, but he'd watch it with her. Then he said, "Bet you don't even make it to midnight."

"Yes, I will," she exclaimed. "The kids will be up until at least two, so I have to make it as long as they do."

"Right, and anyway, Star Wars is not that bad."

"They're too long," she said. "I didn't know you even cared for them. Last time you barely paid attention to the movie."

"Well, that's because you were sitting beside me. Between a movie and my girlfriend, I'm gonna pick my girlfriend."

"Good answer."

---

Jessica and Steve had a good three or four hours until they had to go back and pick up the kids so they went back to her place with a plan to get all of the boxes out of the guest-room-turned-storage-room so it could actually start functioning as a guest room for real. Jessica had already packed most everything up, she just needed Steve to help take everything to the cellar in her backyard.

She hadn't kept much out of the room. There were her dad's old things, of course, and her mom had wanted whatever pictures and baby stuff they had found, but other than that everything was being put away.

"So . . . you have a place for your stuff here now," she told Steve. "For when you spend the night."

They were finally done after two hours of nonstop trips between the house and the cellar, and they were seated in the kitchen, a can of Coke in front of each of them. Her mom was at the stove fixing them grilled cheese sandwiches, and Jessica was trying not to let the smell of the butter cooking turn her stomach. That had nothing to do with her drinking and being slightly hungover; she'd never liked the smell of butter being melted on the stove. The sandwich was always worth it, though.

"Thanks for helping Jess out today," her mom said as she got two plates down from a cabinet above the stove. "I know she's glad all that is done."

"No problem, Ms. H," Steve said. "The room is for me, so . . . it's only right that I help."

Jessica's mom had fixed a sandwich for each of them and when they were done, she put one sandwich on each plate and then brought them to the table.

"Thanks, Mom."

She watched as some of the melted cheese started oozing out between the two slices of bread. She caught it with her finger before bringing it to her mouth and licking the cheese off of her finger.

"Do you care if we eat in my room?"

Her mom smiled. "Keep the door open."

"Of course."

They did as she'd said, of course, and left the door open. They both got comfortable on her bed before beginning to eat. Jessica kept a small radio on her bedside table because she loved listening to music and liked having easy access to it. She turned it on and soft pop music filled the room.

After they were done eating, Jessica stretched out on the bed and closed her eyes. She was jostled a bit when Steve laid down beside her, but she didn't really mind. She also didn't mind when he placed a hand on her stomach even though her shirt had ridden up a little when she'd laid down. She even let out a little sigh of contentment when his thumb began caressing back and forth over her skin.

"You still not feeling a hundred percent?" he asked.

"My head still hurts a little bit, but not as much as it did earlier. I'll be fine by tonight."

"We still have a couple hours before we have to go pick the kids up."



Maybe you should sleep the rest of your hangover off."

That sounded like a good idea. She turned the radio off and set an alarm for an hour and a half; she knew if she fell asleep, that Steve probably would, too.

---

Steve did fall asleep with her, but he was the one who woke up first – even before the alarm went off. He couldn't get over how nice it was to wake up beside Jessica. Waking up beside someone wasn't something he'd done a lot of. Before, he'd usually picked a girl up at a party and they had just stayed there, used one of the rooms where they were, and if they fell asleep together after it was no big deal. But he usually hadn't fallen asleep. He might have stayed with the girl for a few minutes while they'd both come down, but there had been no reason to stay all night. He'd never wanted to make a big deal out of it, and the girls he'd chosen hadn't wanted to either.

But Jessica was a big deal, and he loved how close they were. He also loved how committed Jessica was, how she'd admitted that she could still see them together in a couple of years. She had plans for them, and he loved that. Plans could fall through, of course, but the point was she wanted them to be together for the long haul.

She loved him and he loved her, and the security he had in her was amazing. Never once had she made him feel or think that her attention was on anyone else. Granted, she knew about his dad's history of cheating and how that had affected Steve's view of relationships, so she knew to be careful of that, but still . . . she never showed that type of interest in anyone but him and he liked that.

The alarm was set to go off in about ten minutes, so Steve turned it off and decided to wake Jessica up in his own way. He turned onto his side to make it easier to reach her. She was on her stomach, so the obvious place to touch was her back. He did so gently, rubbing up and down enough to bring her out of her sleep but not enough to startle her out of it.

Jessica had been sleeping better lately, fewer nightmares aside from the occasional one when she had a bad day, a day that reminded her of what had happened in November. He was sleeping better too,

which meant he wasn't having as much trouble getting to sleep. The shadows didn't bother him as much anymore – at least when he was there with Jess and not at home alone.

He waited patiently for Jess to wake up and then grinned when he saw the frown lines appear on her forehead when she realized the alarm wasn't what had woken her up.

"Steve . . ."

"You only had a few more minutes," he said.

"Hm . . . A few minutes is a few minutes."

"Are you feeling any better?"

"I don't know. Let my mind wake up first."

She moved a little closer to him, close enough that they were breathing the same air, and tilted her chin up. Steve knew that meant she wanted a kiss, and he was happy to give her what she wanted. It was just a small one, a sleepy one, but he felt her smile beneath him as she let out a sound of contentment.

She pulled away only slightly. "I'm gonna call the pizza in before we leave so it'll be done by the time we pick it up."

"Good idea," he said, kissing her again, this time more thoroughly. They had a few minutes before they really needed to get going.

---

Steve and Jessica ended up taking separate cars so that he could pick up the pizza while Jessica picked up the kids and took them to pick out some movies.

Jessica was right in that the kids wanted Star Wars and horror movies. They tried to get her to rent all three of the Star Wars movies that were available, but she definitely wasn't having that. She would not sit through all three, and they didn't have enough time to watch all of them anyway, not if each kid was going to be able to pick a movie.

She had picked all the boys up – Nancy and Jonathan would meet her at her house, she assumed – and had gone straight to the video store. Since she only allowed one Star Wars movie, the boys turned to the horror section. Friday the 13th was the one horror movie they agreed on. She had quite a movie collection herself at home, so that was basically all they needed.

Steve hadn't made it back to the house yet when she and the kids got there, but Nancy was there already. Jonathan had to work until six that day, so he'd be a little late, but that was okay.

When Steve got back with the pizza, they ate while they waited for Jonathan to get there. They didn't start the movie marathon until he arrived.

The kids wanted to start out with Star Wars. Jessica didn't mind, really. It gave her a couple hours to get her homework done for that weekend. She still sat in the living room with the others, her textbook and paper spread out in front of her.

Steve left her alone to do her work and she noticed that he really got into the movie when he didn't have her distracting him. She got done with her homework before the movie ended.

To even things out, Nancy was able to pick her movie next. She chose The Outsiders.

"I love that movie." Jessica said.

To be fair, Jessica knew that the kids would probably not like the choice of movie. She wasn't surprised when they ended up talking through it. It didn't matter, though, because by that time Steve had come to sit beside her. He was leaning against the couch and she was laying in a way that allowed her to rest her head on one of his legs.

His hand found its way to her hair, where he massaged her scalp much as he had done that morning.

"Mm. If you keep doing that, I'm not going to make it to midnight."

"I told you that this morning."

She woke right up, though, when Jonathan picked *The Evil Dead*. Jessica didn't find the movie scary at all. On the contrary, the movie was so over the top that it was hilarious, especially when Ash had to replace most of his arm with a chainsaw.

It was around midnight when Jonathan and Nancy left, before they even got to the snacks, and Jessica was wide awake now from laughing at the stupid movie that was *The Evil Dead*. Surprisingly, Mike decided to go home with Nancy. He'd been a little withdrawn, anyway, and Jessica remembered Nancy saying he'd been having trouble and that he'd been trying to contact Eleven every night.

They watched two more movies – both horror – before the boys began to fall asleep sitting up. It was almost 3:30 in the morning, so it was about time for them to start wanting to go to bed. Jessica didn't get to watch *Grease*, needless to say, but Steve was going to be sleeping beside her, so it didn't really matter.

Jessica helped Dustin set up a few pallets on the floor in the living room. The kids would be staying downstairs, mostly because they wanted to fall asleep in front of the TV.

"You guys know where we'll be if you need us," she said. That was mostly for Will's benefit because she didn't know if he was having nightmares anymore. She wanted him to know it was okay to come get her if he did.

---

Once the movie was set up and the lights were out, Steve and Jessica waited for the guys to settle down before heading to bed themselves. He gripped her hand in his as they went upstairs.

When they reached the room, they went through their normal routine of Jessica going to the bathroom to change into her bed clothes while he stripped down to his boxers. Jessica was already yawning when she came back into the room and made a beeline for the bed. Steve took his turn in the bathroom and then he quickly got in bed himself.

Once they were both comfortable, Jessica half on top of him, Steve began to rub her back. It was a surefire way to get her to sleep quickly. She turned her head slightly to give him a quick kiss on his

chest and then settled in closer.

"Love you," she said.

It brought a small, tired smile to his lips as he told her he loved her too.

---

Okay, so I binged ST3 and, um . . . MY HEART HURTS! Won't spoil anything for those of you who haven't seen it yet, but I will say that it has definitely messed up any plans I may have had for a certain character . . . UNLESS I DECIDE TO FIX IT!

Onto other notes: I mean to delve deeper into the movie night, but I just wasn't feeling it, but next chapter is pretty cool because I'm doing a Valentine's Day chapter! I actually really like how it turned out!

## 19. Chapter 19

### Chapter Nineteen

January quickly turned into February. Not much changed. Steve and Jessica still spent as much time as they could together, at her house or on dates. Steve still spent the night when his parents weren't home. He used the room that was his now to put some of his clothes in, but he never slept in there. Ms. Henderson hadn't seemed surprised by that at all, so he was glad she hadn't expected their sleeping arrangements to change.

Jessica had yet to spend the night at his house or spend too much time at his house at all, really, because they usually just found it easier to stay at her place. However, Valentine's Day was coming up and Steve really wanted to do something special – something where they wouldn't have any interruptions in the form of Dustin or anyone else.

He'd already bought the gift he was going to give Jessica – it had happened purely by chance; he'd been at the mall a few towns over and had seen it in a window display. It was cheesy, completely cheesy, but he thought it fit them and he knew Jessica would love it.

The hiccup was that he wanted to have dinner at his house. His house where his parents were never there. He didn't want to go out to a restaurant; he wanted to have actual quality alone time with her, but he knew that would never fly. Jessica was sure her mom wouldn't allow it and he knew Jessica wouldn't lie and say they were going somewhere else. He couldn't trick her either, and just take her there. It would break the trust she had in him, and he never wanted to do that.

With all that in mind, Steve decided he had to talk to Jessica's mom. He picked a day that Jessica was working and headed over after basketball practice. Ms. Henderson seemed surprised that he had come over without Jessica being there.

"I actually wanted to talk to you. Run something by you before, uh . . . before Valentine's Day."

They were in the kitchen. Ms. Henderson had decided he needed a sandwich without actually asking if he'd wanted one, but he didn't mind. He would eat it because she was making it for him.

"Oh, are you and Jessica doing something special?"

"I have something for her. That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Okay." He had her undivided attention once she was done fixing the sandwich.

"I'd like to have dinner with her . . . at my house. My parents won't be there. And I know there's this unspoken rule that I can't have her at my house because my parents aren't there, but I really want a more private place. Somewhere people from school won't be. Also somewhere Dustin won't be. I mean, he's great, but –"

"But it's Valentine's Day."

"Yeah."

"What would be your plans for that evening?"

"Well, my gift and dinner. I even plan on cooking something or cooking together because she always enjoys that. It would be two-and-a-half to three hours tops. From six to nine."

Steve hadn't realized exactly how nervous he was until now. He could see Ms. Henderson thinking about it. She could say no – she could, and it would ruin his plans for Valentine's Day.

"The fact that you're asking bodes well," she said. "You realize that if I give you permission that I'm trusting you to not let things go further than dinner and I'm expecting you to not break that trust."

"I don't want to break your trust. You let me stay here when you really didn't have to and you've even given me my own room. I just . . . it's our first Valentine's Day and I want it to be special for Jess."

Ms. Henderson smiled and let out a small sigh. "Okay. I still want her back by ten, but yes you can have dinner at your house."

Steve was actually surprised; he hadn't expected a yes. He gave her a very happy smile and a thank you before tucking in to enjoy his sandwich.

---

Valentine's Day just happened to land on a Tuesday in 1984, which was good because it meant that Jessica didn't have to work that day. She and Steve hadn't really talked about it, but she knew Steve so she knew he would want to do something.

When she arrived at school the morning of the 14th Steve wasn't waiting for her in the parking lot like he normally did, which just furthered her belief that he was planning something. On any other day he would have told her if he couldn't meet her outside to walk her in – and maybe steal a kiss or two before class started.

She started to worry, though, when she made it all the way to her locker without seeing him. Maybe he was sick and maybe that was why she hadn't heard from him. Maybe he couldn't even talk, so he hadn't been able to call and tell her he wouldn't be there.

Her thoughts stopped, though, when she opened her locker door. There on the hook where she would normally hang her jacket was a silver chain with a key hanging from it. It was about half the size of a house key. She carefully pulled the chain from the hook so she could get a better look at it. She could tell it was new – it was shiny. She was confused, though, because there was no note or anything with it.

Was she supposed to know what it meant?

Steve came up to her, then – so he was there, and he appeared healthy enough – and leaned against the locker beside hers. He made sure she paid attention to the arm he was leaning on. He had a long sleeve shirt on, but the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

She assumed what she was supposed to pay attention to was the new leather wrist band he had on because right in the middle of it was a silver heart shaped medallion – and in the middle of that was what looked like a hole for her key to fit in. Just to be sure, she lifted her hand to his to check – and of course it did.



"Steve . . ."

She really didn't know if she should laugh or cry. On the one hand . . . it was a very cheesy gift. On the other . . . she knew that even if it was cheesy Steve meant exactly what it represented.

He may still have his heart, but she held the key to it.

Her eyes suddenly decided they wanted to cry – and he hadn't even said anything yet. Steve, who had been smiling brightly and still was, pulled her to him, held her and rubbed her back for a few seconds. It helped her calm down.

"They're happy tears, I promise," she said. "I love the necklace and what it means."

"I'm glad. I wasn't even looking for it. I just happened to see it and knew that was what I wanted to get you."

She pulled away enough to look up at him. "That makes it even better."

He bent to kiss her and she gladly let him. She knew they were in the hallway of the school, but she really didn't care. Besides, it only lasted a few seconds.

"Okay, so . . . plan to be picked up at 5:30 today for dinner at my house. I'll cook, if that's okay, and –"

"Steve, I can't go to your house. Mom would freak if she knew we went and stayed for any length of time without your parents being there."

She noticed that his smile changed a little, became something less bright and more serene. "Actually, I already asked her and she was okay with it as long as you're back by ten. I think it was because I actually asked and she seemed to appreciate that. She trusts me, I guess. And even if she didn't, you do, so . . . We can have dinner and maybe even watch a movie or something before I have to get you back home."

Jessica felt herself smile now. This was her first Valentine's Day with

Steve as her boyfriend, her first Valentine's Day with a boyfriend, period, and she knew that Steve was trying to make sure she enjoyed it.

"I love you, Steve Harrington."

"I love you, too."

---

The school day went by fairly uneventfully aside from gym where the class was starting endurance training for the physical fitness test they would be taking soon. They would need to work up to being able to run a mile in six minutes or less.

Jessica hated gym class anyway, but the fact that they were going to have to go outside to run for the first half of class made her hate it even more. Steve was in her gym class, though, so there was that.

"I still don't know why we couldn't just do laps in the gym," she muttered. "It's the middle of February. We're all gonna get pneumonia and die."

Steve, who was beside her, couldn't keep from laughing at her. "You won't even notice the cold once you get your heart pumping."

"If you say so."

"Quit your bellyaching, Henderson. You're one of the fastest runners we have," the coach said.

It was true. She was fast, but she had no endurance at all. She was more a sprinter than a long-distance runner.

At least they had been allowed to wear sweatpants instead of their usual shorts. Steve ended up being right, though. Once she started running, she didn't notice the cold as much. She started out strong, fast, but because she didn't pace herself, she became out of breath after about four minutes.

Her side began hurting, so she slowed to a walk. She needed to catch her breath.

Steve slowed down with her. She knew he didn't need to, with his naturally athletic self, but she was glad he had.

"You okay?"

Normally Steve would've already been through most of his third lap already. She slowed him down big time when he tried keeping pace with her.

"Yeah, I'll be okay in a minute. You don't have to wait."

Steve shrugged. "It's not like this is a grade. I'll walk with you."

They continued on at a leisurely pace until the teacher blew his whistle to get everyone's attention. The running part was over. They could go back inside.

---

After school was over for the day Steve still met Jessica at her locker and still walked her out to her car, but they didn't spend much time there. They would be seeing each other later and they both had things to do before then.

As soon as Jessica walked through her front door her mom called her into the living room.

"Yeah?"

Her mom was sitting in her usual chair. It appeared as if she had been waiting for Jessica to get home.

"Mom?"

"Come sit with me for a few minutes."

Her mom was more serious than she normally was. It made Jessica wonder if something bad had happened.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes. Everything is fine. Are you still planning on going to dinner with Steve?"

"At his house, yeah. He said he asked."

"He did." Her mom smiled a little, her eyes settling on the necklace around Jessica's neck. "What's the key for?"

It was Jessica's turn to smile. "Steve gave it to me. It, um . . . matches his wristband. It has a heart on it."

"That's really sweet. Steve's a good boy."

"Yeah, he is."

"It's because he's a good boy I told him that he could take you to his house for dinner. I'm trusting him." Her mom became serious again. "I'm trusting you. His parents won't be there; Dustin won't be there."

"Mom!"

"I'm just saying. You guys are teenagers and you're in love. Things happen, but I'm trusting you guys not to let them. You're still in school and you're not adults yet . . ."

"Mom, I really don't need the talk. I . . . I know what you expect and Steve knows, and would it help to hear that I'm not ready for that anyway?"

Just like that Jessica saw relief fill her mother's face, her whole body even.

"That would help a lot. I know if you're not ready, then nothing's going to happen. You won't let it and Steve won't pressure you."

"Good. Great. So, this conversation is over?"

"Yes. You're free to go get ready."

The only other time Jessica had moved so fast was when she'd been battling the demogorgan. She'd never had such a mortifying conversation with her mother and she hoped to never have another one.

---

Steve was right on time, five-thirty, as he'd said he'd be. He went inside the Henderson house to say hi to Dustin and Ms. Henderson. He didn't have to wait because Jessica was already ready and waiting in the living room.

She had on a dress he'd never seen before – long-sleeved, blue, with a V-neck. It came down to just above her knees. She wasn't wearing leggings this time; she was going to be so cold going outside even for the few seconds it took to get to his car. The necklace he'd gotten her was perfectly placed, the key stopping just above where her dress started.

Her mom was in the living room as well, but Dustin was nowhere to be seen. He was probably with one of his friends. The Wheeler's house was still hangout central for the kids.

"You look really beautiful, Jess," he said as soon as he'd entered the room. He'd sort of stopped and stared for a few seconds, but he got himself together pretty quickly.

Steve had never really seen Jessica act bashful, but the smile she sent his way now was definitely a shy one. She'd obviously put some effort into her outfit and was glad he'd said something about it. It could also have had something to do with the fact that they were going to go back to his place, and even though he knew nothing was going to happen, it would be the first time they'd be alone. Every other time they'd hung out they'd always been around other people – even when they'd stayed at Tina's the month before there had been other people in the house.

When they were in the car, he turned to her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said immediately. "I'm okay. I just . . . Mom gave me the talk when I got home. It was weird."

"Ah . . . What – what did she say?"

"Well, you know, she's trusting you and she's trusting me and I basically had to tell her that nothing was going to happen because . . ."

"Because what?" he asked after waiting a few seconds for her to continue.

She took a deep breath before speaking. "Because I'm not ready for it to."

Steve wondered if that was why she was so nervous. Jessica knew him, so she knew that he'd taken girls to his house before because his parents usually weren't there, and she also knew what usually happened when they were there.

He grabbed her hand to get her full attention.

"I meant what I said when I told you we were just having dinner and watching a movie. I'm not expecting anything."

"I know." She let out a long sigh. "I do know that. I just . . . it was the whole talk with my mom. She said that things happen, you know, because we're teenagers and hormones and all that stuff, so I just had to know that we were on the same page with this."

"We are definitely on the same page here. I like being able to stay at your house whenever I want, and I really like that your mom trusts me with you."

She smiled. "Yeah, that is nice." She squeezed his hand. "Let's go."

---

Steve ended up fixing something simple for dinner. Neither of them wanted dinner to take up too much time, so they settled on baked chicken over yellow rice with broccoli as the vegetable. They each had one glass of wine with their dinner and they talked and laughed while they ate.

"I'm glad you decided to do this," she told him. "It's really nice, so much better than going to a crowded restaurant."

"I thought you'd appreciate it." Steve leaned back in his chair. "Now that I know your mom won't really mind, I might ask her if we can have a party here, for your birthday next month."

"Steve, I don't want a party."

"Not like a party-party. I meant like just have it here. Your mom and Dustin and the others."

"Oh. Well, that would be okay." She grinned then. "You know, after I turn eighteen, I'll be dating a minor until June . . ."

Steve grinned back. "Uh-oh, you might get in trouble."

"So much trouble." She laughed lightly while shaking her head. "Anyway, what movie do you want to watch?"

"I picked out a few of mine that I know you like, so any of those are fine."

Jessica and Steve washed the dishes after they got done eating and then they went into the living room. Steve had placed the movies he'd picked on top of the TV set, so Jessica went to go look through them. There was a CD player placed on an entertainment center in the corner of the living room. The CD player was a newly released invention – new and expensive. It was something Steve had actually wanted, so his parents had bought him one along with a few CDs.

Music filled the room and Jessica turned to face Steve.

"I thought we were watching a movie."

"We have to dance at least once. It's Valentine's Day."

Jessica smiled because Steve was just grinning at her openly.

"Just once?"

"Well, if you want to watch a movie, yeah."

A slow song came on then and Steve made his way to her.

"You know I'm just as good at dancing as I am at skating," Jessica said as he took one of her hand in his and placed his other on her waist. She put her free hand on his shoulder. "This might not end well."

Steve pulled her closer and she followed his lead; they mostly just swayed together. That was it, just swaying, but it felt like so much

more. Steve was looking at her with such adoration that it made her breath catch in her throat. She was so lucky to have found someone who loved her as much as Steve did. She was lucky that she loved him just as much.

She got just about as close as she could so she could place her head against his chest.

"This night is perfect," she said softly. "Thank you."

As the music continued playing, they ended up just moving back and forth while holding each other, both having wrapped their arms around the other.

They both came to the unspoken agreement that they wanted to keep dancing instead of stopping to watch a movie.



## 20. Chapter 20

### Chapter Twenty

As February turned into March the day temperatures became more bearable to Jessica, but it meant that P.E. was usually held outside if it wasn't raining. They were still training for their physical fitness test. She had no problems with the sit ups or the pull ups, and she was even flexible enough to pass that part of the test, but she still had trouble running the mile. Though she was getting a little better with the help of Steve. He told her to keep pace with him because he didn't just take off and use all of his stamina at once. She still felt like she was going to die after about two laps though.

One day in mid-March Jessica's science class had to go outside to draw parts of the ecosystem. The teacher walked them out to the woods behind their school, notebooks and pencils held in the students' hands, and let them loose. They had to stay within eyesight, of course, but they were still free to wander.

Jessica was not happy. She'd started lagging behind the others about midway. Steve shared her science class, so he stayed behind with her. Her hands were shaking, not badly at first, but the closer she got to the woods the harder they began to shake.

"What's wrong with you?" Steve asked.

"Why do we have to go in the woods? There could be wild animals or something in there."

"Um . . . not really, not this close to the school. Or probably not."

"There could be something else in there," she said, looking at him pointedly, hoping he got what she was trying to say.

By the way Steve came to a stop, she knew he now understood what she was talking about.

"I thought it only came out at night."

"I mean, that's the only time we know that it attacked someone, but it

was at your place during the day that one time. When Nancy saw it. And . . . the last time I was in the woods, I ended up stuck . . . over there."

Steve grabbed her hand. "That was not your fault. If you hadn't gone after Nancy, that wouldn't have happened. You know not to, you know, crawl into one of those things now."

She had to admit that Steve was right about that one. She never would've crawled into that nasty hole if she hadn't been worried about Nancy going into it alone.

"Okay. I still don't like it."

"It's only for an hour. And we'll stay together. Okay?"

She squeezed his hand and nodded, leaning into his side. They started walking again, side by side.

Jessica knew that she was probably overreacting, but she didn't want any surprises. As far as she knew, there had only been one demogorgan and it had been taken care of, and she hadn't heard about anything weird going on around town and with as nosy as her brother and his friends were, they would've heard about it, which meant she would have as well.

Still, the woods were not her favorite place to be. The fact that she had to go into them for a school assignment meant she would like them even less.

---

The forest behind the high school was thick with trees, so even though the sun was shining brightly there wasn't much light filtering through the branches. The students had enough to see to do the assignment they had and that was about it

Steve stayed with Jessica the whole time; they were lab partners. Even if they hadn't been, she was his girlfriend, and he knew she didn't want to be there. She had admitted being a little bit afraid, so of course he stayed with her.

She seemed to be doing okay. She wasn't having any trouble

breathing or anything else that could come with anything that reminded her of November, so it couldn't be but so bad. Still, he stayed.

"Why do we have to draw leaves? And bugs?" she asked.

They had a list of things that could be found in the woods behind the school and their assignment was to find and draw as many of them as they could. They were supposed to know what everything looked like – they'd been studying it for weeks now.

"You told me once that school was designed to drive you crazy," Steve said. "Well . . . there you go."

"Hm."

They continued on in relative silence until the teacher decided it was time for them to go back inside – they needed time to get back to class, gather their things, and get to their next class.

On the way back Steve asked, "So . . . about your party. Who do you want there?"

"Well, I mean, I don't know. Nothing big. Maybe a few people. Nancy, Jonathan, the kids. Tina's fine. Chris is fine. It's just going to be pizza, cake, and ice cream, so . . ."

Steve knew she wouldn't want anything huge, which was why he was planning a little get together at his house. They would have the party early, around lunch time, and then he would have her for the rest of the day. Her birthday just happened to fall on a Sunday that year, so it worked out that they wouldn't have to worry about school that day.

"And presents," he said. "Don't forget presents."

"Oh, how could we ever?" She grabbed onto his arm and walked with him. "What're you getting me?"

"I'm not telling you," he said, laughing. "It's a surprise for a reason. Uh . . . but I do have something to ask you."

"Okay . . ."

"What are you doing for spring break?"

"Probably not much. Why?"

Spring break was going to come late that year because Easter wasn't until the last week of April. His family usually went away for Easter. Nothing really changed; he still didn't get to see much of them, but they did leave Hawkins for the week.

"Well, you know, we go away for Spring break. We have that house by the lake – our vacation house – and I don't really want to spend a whole week away from you. I know we'd have to talk to your mom first, and I know she might say no, but you'll be an adult, and the whole reason she didn't want us to spend the night at my house without anyone there was because we're not adults yet. So . . ."

Steve knew that he was rambling, talking really fast, but the truth was he really didn't want to go without seeing Jessica for a week. If he thought he could get out of it, could just stay with her in Hawkins he wouldn't even ask, but he had to go. The week spent away was a vacation time, but it was also a time where his dad got together with all his work buddies. His dad wanted him to be there so he could get to know them a little. He did not want to do any such thing, but his dad still expected him to fall in line and follow in his footsteps.

He would need Jessica there to keep him from going crazy and from being completely miserable.

"Your parents will be there?"

"More or less. I mean, we'll be in the same house. I can't say they'll always be there."

"Right. I mean, I can ask, and I don't really see her having a problem with it since I will be eighteen."

Steve relaxed when he felt her fingers intertwine with his and he dipped his head to kiss her hair. He hoped her mom would say yes because even though he was going away with his parents he would still be very much alone if Jessica wasn't allowed to come with him.

---

That day after school Steve walked Jessica to her car. Baseball season was starting soon and he had to get to practice, but he still walked her to her car as he did every other school day.

They stopped by his car first because he needed to grab his sports bag. Jessica waited patiently as he popped the trunk and then watched as he got what he needed. Before he could close the trunk back up, though, she quickly placed her hand on it and applied a little pressure so he would know she didn't want it closed.

In the trunk, right there in the middle of it, was a very familiar bat with nails in it.

"Steve?" She looked at him, but he very pointedly would not look her in the eye. "Steve, you've been carrying this around with you ever since . . . You know?"

He shrugged but didn't say anything. He almost seemed ashamed to admit that what had happened had obviously affected him more than he'd ever let on to her.

"Steve? You're the one who told me that I should be able to talk to you about this stuff – that we should be able to talk to each other."

"There's nothing to talk about. Not really. I keep it as a precaution – just in case."

"Really?" Jessica removed her hand from the top of the trunk and moved closer to him. She grabbed his hand and lowered her voice. "Because it's okay if you're not okay. If . . . if things are still bothering you – I mean . . . I want to know if you're not okay. Okay? Because you have been there for me so many times through all this. You've been helping me through everything, so if you need my help . . ."

"I'm fine, Jess. I swear, it's just a precaution." He stepped closer to her as well and pulled her to him. "I used to see . . . it . . . in every shadow or when something moved in the dark too suddenly, and I do have the occasional nightmare. But I'm almost never alone now and that's because of you, so even if you didn't know it you were helping. You are helping."

Steve was alone a lot less now, that much was true, and she had never seen him wake from a nightmare or anything like that. She just hoped he was telling her the truth, because she hadn't even known he had kept the bat. She remembered they had taken it from the Byers' house the night everything had happened. She didn't think they had meant to, but she'd been holding it in the car when they'd left. After that she hadn't known what had happened to it or where it had gone.

Now she knew.

Jessica tilted her head up and pushed her lips against Steve's neck only for Steve to cup her face in his hands so he could kiss her properly. He still smiled into their kisses, and she still loved it when he did.

"I love you," he said.

"Mm." She kissed him quickly once more. "I love you too."

Once she was satisfied with the amount of kisses she'd given him she pulled away. He really did need to get to practice, and she knew that he would totally be okay with being late if it meant he got to be with her, so she had to be the responsible one when it came to that.

"I'll see you later."

---

"Nancy just called," her mom said almost as soon as Jessica walked through the door.

"Did she say what she wanted?"

"Just for you to call her back."

"Okay. Thanks."

Jessica went to the kitchen, dropped her stuff on the floor underneath the phone, and dialed the Wheeler's number. Mrs. Wheeler was the one who answered, but it didn't take long for Nancy to pick up once she knew who was calling.

"Hey," Nancy said. "I was just wondering if you wanted to go

bowling. A group of people are heading over, thought you might want to join."

"Nance, I don't really bowl."

"Neither do I, but they have good food."

Jessica grinned. "Uh, okay. What time?"

"Now. We'd get there around four, stay for a few games, and then head back home."

"Okay, sure. Uh, Steve is at baseball practice, but he'll probably be coming over here later. I'll let mom know she he knows to stay here and wait, I guess."

Once Jessica was done talking, she hung up, told her mom what was going on, and then went upstairs to put her stuff in her room. She left with only her wallet and keys, figuring she wouldn't need anything else.

The bowling alley was in the next town over and it took about fifteen minutes to get there. The parking lot was packed, but it wasn't that hard to find a parking place. Nancy was waiting for her at the entrance; so was Jonathan. She was surprised. He wasn't one for social gatherings at all, so she wondered what Nancy had done to get him there.

"Uh, hi," she said, grinning at the fact that Jonathan wasn't in his element at all and that it was showing on his face. He looked like he was sucking on a lemon or was constipated . . . or both.

"Hi," he said, giving her a small smile – the expression was brief and then he went back to showing how uncomfortable he was.

Nancy took the lead by going on inside. With nothing else to do, Jessica and Jonathan followed her in. She went straight to the snack bar, which was fine with Jessica because she had no plans at all of bowling.

Jonathan ended up only getting a drink, but Jessica and Nancy ended up getting an order of nachos to share and a drink each.

There were little round tables up on a little platform in front of the alleys where people could sit if they weren't playing, so that's where they went. It was pretty cool; they were out of the way but still able to see what was going on around them.

There was a group of girls that Nancy seemed to know; they were actually bowling and only waved when they saw her. There was that group of girls Jessica had sat with at Steve's basketball game; she knew them but only well enough to say hi to. Some of the basketball team was there as well – Tommy was there with Carol, but Jessica had ignored them and they hadn't said anything to her either, which was a win in her book. There were even a few football players, who seemed to be there with their girlfriends, who were cheerleaders, and a few other football players who had apparently come without dates. The ones without dates were up on the platform with a whole lot of food at their table.

"So Mike got in trouble today at school. He was sent home early," Nancy said.

"What happened?"

"He started a food fight in the cafeteria."

"Mike?"

Jessica couldn't believe it. Mike had never been the one to cause trouble. Of course . . . he had changed a lot since November.

"Yeah, I couldn't believe it either," Nancy said.

"Is he in trouble?" Jonathan asked.

"He's grounded. I just don't understand why he's acting out this way. I mean, I get that he lost . . . you know, but I don't understand why he's getting in trouble because of it."

"People grieve differently. All you can do is let him know that you're there for him."

They continued talking for about thirty minutes, about life, about what was new. Jonathan had been a witness to Will having an



episode where he'd thought he was back in the Upside Down. They didn't happen often, but it was still enough to scare Jonathan and his mom. Nancy had taken to having weekly dinners with Barb's parents, mostly because she felt guilty about her friend's death.

"Is that . . . okay? I mean, don't you feel the need to tell them when you're with them?" Jessica asked. "What if you slip up?"

"I haven't. I'm not going to. I just . . . feel like I have to do something and this is the only thing I know to do right now."

A few minutes later the group that Jessica knew came over and invited them to play a game or two with them. They were going to go up against the guys that hadn't come with dates.

"Uh . . . guys?"

Nancy and Jonathan adamantly refused.

"Come on, we need one more."

"I won't be much help," Jessica said. "I have no aim."

"We'll let you guys use the guard rails," one of the football players said. "No big deal."

Jessica sent a look Nancy's way. She shrugged and smiled.

"We'll watch from here."

"If you guys were real friends, you wouldn't make me play alone," she teased.

Both the group of girls and the football players seemed glad that they'd gotten her to give in.

"All right, let me go get some shoes. I'll be there in a minute."

---

Once Jessica got her shoes and put them on, she went over to the group of girls. The game was so not going to be fair because it was going to be girls against boys. She was prepared to lose even if she

was allowed to have the guard rails up; they all seemed to need it.

The place had a no food on the floor policy, but drinks were allowed, so they all got a cup of soda each, Jessica getting a refill on her own.

The game went better than Jessica thought that it would even though she barely broke a hundred on the score board. She still had fun – mostly because she was able to laugh at herself for not being athletically inclined at all.

"You weren't joking when you said you didn't bowl," one of the guys said. She thought his name was Jason, but she wasn't sure. She didn't know all of the guys on the football team.

"I really wasn't. I can't do much at all when it comes to any type of sport. Steve is even helping me so I can make it through the mile."

"You wanna play another one?"

"Uh . . . sure. Let me check in with Nancy and Jonathan real quick, see how long they're staying. I'll be back."

Nancy and Jonathan were still on the platform. They were still talking, both smiling every so often, and she could tell they had been watching her totally fail at bowling.

"What time were you guys wanting to leave? They want to play another, but if you're leaving soon, I'll just hang with you guys and then play after."

"We're getting ready to go now, actually. You seem to be enjoying yourself."

"I am. Surprisingly. You sure you don't mind me playing?"

"No, go ahead."

Jessica grabbed her jacket from the back of the chair she'd placed it on when she'd first sat down and then went back to the group of girls she was playing with.

"We good?" one of the girls asked, and Jessica nodded.

"I can only play one more, then I have to go home. Homework and all."

"And Steve," the same girl said. It caused Jessica to grin and maybe even blush a little.

"And Steve," she agreed.

It was as Jessica was taking her fourth turn of the game that a bout of dizziness hit her, and she wasn't even able to lift the ball properly to line up her shot. It just hit her all of a sudden and everything became too much. The lights in the building hurt her eyes, all the talking jumbled up and hurt her head.

"Jess?" It was one of the girls again. She wasn't sure which one. "Are you okay?"

"You don't look so great."

Someone grabbed her by the shoulder and led her to a bench nearby so she could sit down.

"I – I think I'm gonna be sick."

"You need to go to the bathroom?"

She nodded even though she wasn't sure she would make it there. Sure, she could stand, but moving on her own was going to be hard. She was so weak.

"Here, I've got her," Jason said. "I'm gonna take her to get her shoes. I'll sit with her outside for a bit. Maybe the cold air will help clear her head."

She stood up, holding out her hands against him when he took hold of her arms. "I can do it. I need my jacket."

It was slow-going, but she eventually made her way to the counter to exchange the rented shoes for her own. She almost fell to the ground when she had to bend over to take them off and put hers back on, but Jason kept her pretty steady.

"What exactly is wrong?" he asked

"I'm just d-dizzy and my brain is kind of . . . kind of foggy."

In the back of her mind she knew that her words were coming out slower than they should and that they were kind of slurred. She felt . . . she felt drunk, which was ridiculous because they didn't sell alcohol at the bowling alley. Something was wrong.

"What time is it? I'm just . . . I'm just gonna call Steve, okay?"

There was a payphone near the restrooms; she could call him from there. He'd be at her house by now.

She was still able to walk on her own, but not very well. She kept bumping into people, and her vision was blurring even more. When she finally reached the payphone, she couldn't even make out the numbers to dial properly. In fact, she could barely make herself pick up the phone off of the receiver.

"You didn't even put a quarter in the slot, Henderson."

Oh yeah. It was a payphone.

"Let's get you outside. You really need some fresh air, hm?"

"I'm – I don't want to go anywhere with you, Jason."

"In a few minutes, you won't care where we go. I can wait."

What?

He crowded into her space, backed her right against the wall, and placed one hand in her hair and one on her waist. She began to struggle, whatever that was worth because she could barely move, she was so weak.

"Come on, s-stop," she said. She knew she wasn't speaking loud enough to be heard by anyone but him. She couldn't make her voice work right.

The hand on her waist slid over her stomach and down to the zipper

of her jeans. She was able to grab his wrist, but it didn't keep him from sliding the zipper down.

Suddenly she knew exactly what had happened. He had put something in her drink. She had left it alone when she'd gone to talk to Nancy and Jonathan and when she'd played her turn each time during the game. Who knew how long she'd had it in her system? Long enough to have made her feel like she was going to pass out.

Jason held her head still so he could slot his lips over hers and he didn't seem to like it when she fought to keep her mouth shut.

She knew she should be angry or scared, but she couldn't feel much of anything at all. Her body was kind of numb. She knew she didn't want his mouth or hands on her, but she couldn't find the energy to really care about it.

The only thing she was aware of was the fact that one second he was trying to push her jeans down and had succeeded in getting them halfway down her thighs and the next he was jerked away from her.

Her body slid down all the way until her bottom hit the floor and she brought her knees up to wrap her arms around them. Someone was suddenly there beside her and she wanted to flinch but she couldn't.

"Jess?"

It ended up being Nancy. She apparently hadn't left when she'd said she was going to. Neither had Jonathan; she could hear him too. He was yelling at Jason. Something about Jason saying it was none of his business, she wasn't putting up a fight, and Jonathan saying it didn't look like she had the choice to.

"Jess, come on, let me help you up."

She did get up eventually, and Nancy helped get her back in order, her clothes back in place. She wasn't sure what happened then with Jason and Jonathan, where Jason went, but Jonathan and Nancy stayed there with her in the hallway. She wanted to sit back down, so she did. Nancy sat beside her and Jessica leaned against her.

It didn't take her long to pass out. It was the weirdest thing because

she could feel herself fading – the noise, the lights – so it wasn't sudden. She knew she was going to pass out.

And so she did

---

Nancy stayed with Jessica, there on the floor in the hallway, while Jonathan made a phone call to Hawkins Police Station – she hoped Hopper would be there, or if he wasn't that Flo, his secretary would know what to do.

It was Jonathan who had noticed something was up in the first place. They had made it to the exit already before they'd seen Jason following Jessica to the hallway that lead to the bathrooms. Nancy hadn't really thought anything of it until Jonathan had pointed out that Jessica had been walking a little weird, stumbling into people and things like that. They had decided to follow after them, and it was a good thing they had.

Jason had been all over Jessica, and she'd just been there pressed against the wall and barely moving because she couldn't. Jonathan had forced Jason away from Jessica and hadn't had to use violence, surprisingly.

Now Jessica was passed out and Nancy was just making sure she was breathing properly. Who knew what Jason had given her and what it would do to her? What if she threw up while passed out? She could choke on her on vomit.

Once Jonathan was done talking, he squatted down beside them.

"Hop is calling a few people he knows from the police force here. They'll check things out. We have to get her to a hospital. He said Hawkins is fine. Since . . . since we got here in time, he's just doing it for record purposes anyway."

Jonathan had to end up carrying Jessica to his car – they would have to leave hers there and have someone come get it later. Nancy had to leave hers there too, so she could ride in the back with Jessica.

"You know, she was only here because I asked her to be."

"That doesn't make this your fault."

That was all that was said as Jonathan took off, going faster than was probably safe but definitely faster than was legal.

---

Okay, so this has been playing in my mind since I've really started this story, that at some point someone would put something in Jessica's drink, I just didn't know when or who would. I had it going through my mind that Tommy would do it, not to really hurt her, just to mess with her, but then this happened instead. I don't know how true it is, but I read on Tumblr that Steve was supposed to have date-raped Nancy in the first season when he invited her over to his house, but that Joe hadn't really liked that idea at all and they changed it. THANK GOD, NOT MY BOY! Anyway, but since they had originally been going to have that in the show, I thought that it sort of validated my idea that something like that would happen, and since Steve was the one that usually watched her drink she wasn't used to doing it herself, and also BROAD DAYLIGHT and IN A BOWLING ALLEY! There will be falling out from this, but I'm going to try and deal with it as realistically and logically as possible. Let me know what you guys think.

## 21. Chapter 21

Okay, so this is shorter than my normal chapter, but this is also basically just the filler chapter explaining everything about how Jess is going to feel and everyone's reactions.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Steve had been at Jessica's house for a little over an hour when Ms. Henderson got a call from Hopper saying that Jessica was on her way to the hospital and that they should get there as soon as they could. He wouldn't say anything other than he knew that she'd been with Nancy and Jonathan and she'd passed out. They were the ones taking her to the hospital.

Steve knew from what Ms. Henderson had told him that she had gone to the bowling alley with Nancy, and she'd been fine at school and after when he'd walked her to her car, so he wondered what had happened.

Once she hung up, she frantically began to gather her things together.

"Steve, will you go pick up Dustin? He's at the Wheeler's house. He'll want to come with us to the hospital. I'll call so he'll know to be ready when you get there."

"Sure thing, Ms. H."

He was glad she seemed to already know that he was going to the hospital with her. He had to know what was going on, that Jessica was okay.

He was already grabbing his keys and heading to the door when he heard Ms. Henderson start speaking to who he assumed was Mrs. Wheeler.

The drive to pick up Dustin took maybe all of five minutes, the house was so close to the Henderson's, and Dustin was waiting outside when Steve got there. He barely had the car fully stopped before



Dustin was hopping into the front seat.

"What happened? Mom didn't say much over the phone."

"Well, we don't know much. Just that she passed out and that Nancy and Jonathan are taking her to the hospital."

"You don't know why she passed out?"

"No. Hopper didn't say."

"Wait, Hopper was the one who called Mom?"

"Yeah. That was all he said though; she passed out, she was with Nancy and Jonathan. We'll find out more when we get to the hospital."

Dustin was a little ball of anxious energy during the car ride to the hospital, and Steve couldn't blame him. If he hadn't been driving, he probably would've been bouncing his leg up and down.

He didn't know where to go exactly once he got to the hospital, so he decided to just park near the Emergency Room entrance and go in from there. That had been the right choice, because he immediately saw Hopper, Jonathan, and Nancy when he and Dustin walked in.

Hopper gestured him over and let him know that Ms. Henderson was back in the ER with Jessica.

"She's awake," Hopper said. "Disoriented but awake. Uh, listen, kid, I don't know how to say this other than bluntly, so I'm just gonna say it. Someone put something in her drink."

Steve noticed when Dustin stepped a little closer to him, so Steve put a hand on his shoulder. Even at Dustin's age, the kid would know what drugging someone meant – especially a guy drugging a girl.

"At the bowling alley? In the middle of the day?" Dustin asked. "I thought that only happened at parties."

"According to these two," Hopper nodded at Nancy and Jonathan, "it was Jason Donovan. Or at least he's who she ended up with."

"I noticed she was acting weird," Jonathan said. "We were about to leave – Nancy and I – and I saw him following her into the back. I think she was trying to use the phone. I, uh . . . thought we should check it out, she was having trouble walking on her own. When we got there, Jason was . . ."

Jonathan didn't seem able to finish, so Nancy took over. "Jonathan stopped him from –" She broke off when she looked at Dustin and she wasn't able to finish either.

"What'd he do to my sister?" Dustin said, his voice louder than it probably should've been considering they were in public.

"Nothing," Hopper said. "I mean, not what he could've done. From what these two say, he was on his way there, but they got there in time. They pulled him off before he could."

"Is she . . . You said she's awake?"

Steve couldn't believe that he'd been at baseball practice while all of this had gone down. Plus, Jessica didn't even really like going places like that and the one time she decided to go out and have fun something like this had happened.

"She woke up on her way here. She's thrown up already once and she's going to feel awful for a few days. It's gonna hit her like the flu. She'll be weak and she'll feel sick. She'll probably be a little achy. I've seen this before."

"What about the guy who did this?"

"Well, there's no proof that he put the drug in her drink, just that he noticed she wasn't feeling great and followed her because of that. Targeted her because of that. To be honest, this didn't happen in Hawkins so I really can't take legal action against anybody even if I wanted to."

"So he's just gonna get away with it?" Nancy asked. "This is gonna get swept under the rug?"

"Trust me, I don't want this guy doing this to anyone else either," Hopper said, "but the thing is . . . Jessica might not even remember

anything that happened. That's what the drug is used for. Memory lapses. And even if she can place him there . . . society is not on the girl's side in these situations. Small town boy, small town athlete. The worst he'll probably get is a slap on the wrist with a request not to do it again. If Jess wants to fight this, I'll be with her every step of the way, but . . . her name might be dragged through the mud while she does it. I mean, I can keep an eye on him, throw everything at him that I can, fines, tickets, I can probably even get a warrant to go through his things. If he has anything on him, I can get him for possession, but . . . like I said, I don't have jurisdiction on this case."

Steve knew what Hopper was saying was true. True, he'd never done anything like what Jason had done, but he had done things that he knew he would've gotten in trouble for if he hadn't played basketball or if his last name hadn't been Harrington. His parents weren't around much, but their last name meant something in Hawkins. He'd never really thought of the unfairness of it all until just then.

It wasn't long before someone came out of the ER so Dustin and Steve could go back to see Jessica. Nancy followed them and grabbed Steve's hand as soon as they got through the doors.

"Nance?"

"Um, I have to tell you something. I don't, uh . . . we didn't tell Hopper, so no one else knows, but I think you should."

"Okay . . ."

"I don't know exactly how far Jason got with her. I know he didn't – he wasn't able to . . . He was forcing her jeans down her legs when we found her, so . . . I just thought you should know, so, I mean, in case –"

Steve got it. He needed to know so he would be careful with Jessica. Not that he wouldn't have been anyway, but now he knew that even though Nancy and Jonathan had gotten there on time, some other stuff had obviously gone down.

He squeezed her hand in thanks. He was so very grateful they had been looking out for Jessica.

"Are you guys sticking around, or . . ."

She shook her head. "They won't let everyone back there. Just call if anything changes."

---

Jessica was awake and had been for at least a good thirty minutes or so, if her sense of time was correct. It might have been off because she was still having trouble focusing; she had to concentrate just to see things clearly.

She'd been by herself for about the first ten minutes after arriving at the hospital. She knew Nancy and Jonathan had brought her there because she'd woken up while he was driving them there.

The woman at the front desk of the ER had immediately taken her back and a nurse was waiting and ready for her. She'd been put in a room, given a gown to put on, and was then hooked up to an IV and that had been that. Her mom had come in eventually, a doctor following behind her. They were both talking, but Jessica had a hard time following their conversation.

All she really wanted to do was go back to sleep. She would have if the doctor hadn't started talking to her and asking her questions even though she couldn't really take in the words being said.

The doctor helped her sit up, which caused her to become dizzy, which then caused her to become ill. She was glad there was a trash can nearby.

The doctor said something about giving her something for nausea and soon a nurse came in to do just that. She had a syringe full of a clear liquid that was shot into her through her IV line and she almost immediately stopped feeling sick to her stomach.

"Mom?"

Someone grabbed her hand, said, "I'm here, baby," and then squeezed gently.

"What . . . happened?"

"You don't remember?"

"I remember bowling. I know Nancy and J-Jonathan brought me here."

"Ms. Henderson, memory loss is normal. She may remember later, even as early as tomorrow." The doctor stepped into Jessica's line of sight. "Are you feeling any pain at all?"

"My body . . . hurts, like . . . I'm achy and weak."

"You don't appear to have any bruises," the doctor said. "They are side effects of the drug you were given."

"The drug. He put it in my drink."

Her hand was squeezed again, her mother still by her side.

"In normal cases we would perform a rape kit, but your friends say they got there in time. Judging by your appearance and by your lack of pain, I'm going to say they were telling the truth."

There was a pause, enough of one that Jessica could have told her something different had there been anything to tell. She didn't remember everything, but she knew she hadn't been violated – at least not in that way.

"Mom? I want . . . I want Steve. Is he here?"

"He wasn't here when I got here. He had to pick up Dustin."

The doctor kept talking about having to keep her for a few hours just to make sure the nausea medicine continued to work. They wanted her to try and eat something small and to also drink some water. If she couldn't keep fluids down, then she couldn't go home.

It was in the middle of the doctor explaining everything that both Dustin and Steve came in. Dustin was a lot more subdued than he normally was, which she was thankful for. She didn't know if she could handle his normal exuberance. Steve was quiet as well, but she could tell he was relieved to see that she was awake and sitting up.

Dustin ended up standing by his mom, and Steve ended up sitting beside her on the bed. When he didn't automatically touch her in some way, she reached out her free hand so he would know it was okay. She wasn't afraid at all, and she wanted him to touch her. She was still thankful that he had given her a choice.

Once his hand was in hers, she pushed her fingers in between his and squeezed. She didn't want him going anywhere.

The doctor soon left, letting them know that she would probably feel as if she had the flu for a few days. She would need to stay home from school for the rest of the week, but other than that she should be good to go once they were sure she wasn't going to throw up again.

---

Hopper came in a few minutes after the doctor left. His eyes and face were careful, even his movements were.

"How you doin', kid?" he asked, and Jessica shrugged.

"Okay."

"I, uh, hate to have to do this right now, but I have to ask you a few questions."

"I don't remember much," she said. "I know that – I know that it was Jason who put whatever in my drink. And I know that I tried to get away to . . . to call Steve to come get me because I wasn't feeling well enough to drive. He followed me into the hallway where the phone was."

Steve, who was still on the bed with her, still holding her hand because she hadn't let go, used his thumb to caress the back of her hand. He hoped it would bring her some level of comfort. She'd been going to call him; she'd known he would drop everything to come get her if she'd just been able to get in touch with him.

"When did you start feeling weird?"

"It was during one of the games. We played one game and then I went to check with Nancy about when she was leaving, and then we

started playing another one."

"We?"

"Uh, four of the football players and three girls I know from school. I don't know them well, but, you know, enough to talk to. I couldn't tell you their names right now if I wanted to, but I remember Jason. I know I picked up the phone – or I think I did, I think I remember that, because I couldn't see the numbers well enough to dial, and that's – that's where everything gets a little hazy. I woke up in Jonathan's car."

So she didn't remember anything of what Jason had done. That was probably a blessing for now, especially when she just needed to rest.

"Is Jason the only one who . . . there were three other girls playing, and the other guys were friends of Jason."

"As far as we know, yes. Nothing else was reported, and I called in a few of the guys I know who work the force over there."

"Good."

"Yeah. If you remember anything else, you know where to find me. I'll probably stop by your house in a couple of days anyway, once you're feeling better."

"I'll need my car back," Jessica said. "It's still there at the bowling alley."

"I'll get someone on that if you give me the keys. You just get better."

"My jacket. They're in my jacket."

Ms. Henderson, who had put all of Jessica's things on one of the chairs in the room, went through everything to get to the jacket and then found the keys for Hopper.

Not long after Hopper left a nurse came in with a small paper cup and a pitcher of ice water.

"The doctor wants you to try to keep this down, okay? Drink slowly

or you might get sick again. If you can keep this down, we will try you on some crackers."

The nurse placed the cup and pitcher on the bedside table and then left them to it. Jessica had pretty much everything she'd need, and all they could do now was wait to see if she'd be sick again or not.

Jessica slowly laid back on the bed and Steve watched as she let out a deep exhale.

"They didn't say I couldn't sleep, right?"

"No," her mother said. "But you should drink some of the water first. It's why they brought it."

Jessica did as Ms. Henderson asked, though she made it look like a chore. Her hand shook a little as she brought the cup to her lips. She had said she was feeling weak. She took sips until she had finished the whole thing, and then relaxed back against the pillow again.

It didn't take long for Jessica to go to sleep. They would have to wake her up again once the doctor decided to try her on food, but at the moment she seemed just fine not being awake.



## 22. Chapter 22

Okay, so this is probably going to be the last update for a little while. I definitely will not be able to update as quickly as I have been. I've had the summer off because I work at a school, but it's starting back up again tomorrow. I'm a sub, not an ACTUAL teacher, so I don't work everyday, but I do work frequently, so just keep that in mind.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

The next day started out normally for Steve. It wasn't any big deal that he'd spent the night with Jessica even though it had been a school night. She'd pretty much gone straight to bed as soon as they'd gotten home from the hospital and hadn't moved from her spot since. She'd been awake when the alarm went off for Steve to get up so he could go to school. He'd rather have stayed with her since she wasn't feeling great, but he knew her mom would be there to take care of her. Jessica wouldn't have to move from the bed aside from getting up to use the bathroom if she didn't want to.

She asked him if he would get her assignments for her and bring them to her after school, which he had no problem doing, and after he was done getting ready, he kissed her quickly on the cheek. He'd wanted to kiss her on the lips, but Nancy had said to be careful, so that's what he was being. Jessica hadn't shown an aversion to being touched the day before, but Steve didn't know when or if she would ever remember what Jason had been trying to do, and he didn't want to make her uncomfortable at all.

"Take it easy today. And try to eat something."

Jessica hadn't skipped a meal in a long time – probably since November when everything was happening with Will and all that other weird stuff – but he knew if she started stressing about what had happened the day before, her stomach would make her not want food.

"Mm. I'll try soup or something."

It wasn't until he got to school that he knew he was not going to have

a good day. Rumors had already started spreading about what had happened at the bowling alley and, rumors being rumors, almost none of it was true. Pretty much the only things anyone got right was that Jason and Jessica had been alone in the hallway of the bowling alley at some point and that Jonathan had interrupted what had been going on.

Their story ended up being that they'd gone off together, not that Jason had followed her. There was talk of kissing and touching and the only reason Jason and Jessica had stopped was because Jonathan had found them.

He was suddenly glad that Jessica wouldn't be coming back to school for the rest of the week. She didn't need to hear all the lies. The whole thing was ridiculous; Jessica had never once gone off with a guy before; the people who knew her wouldn't believe she'd just randomly picked one up at a bowling alley and decided to hook up with him. Even if she hadn't been dating Steve, she wouldn't have done that.

He got through his first four classes by ignoring the stares and the whispers. He tried paying more attention to the teachers than he normally did, mostly because he knew he had to take the assignments to Jessica after school. History, science, and English would be a breeze because most of that dealt with reading and answering questions. Math ended up being a review day; they were having a test that Friday.

During lunch Steve sat with Nancy and Jonathan. They asked how Jessica was but had seemed to decide to ignore what everyone else was saying, which suited Steve just fine.

Some of the members from the basketball team came over and sat down with them. He just knew they were going to say something. It had him on edge.

Luckily, Chris seemed to be leading that particular group because the first thing said was, "What happened yesterday? Jessica wouldn't . . . do what everyone is saying she did."

Steve let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Jason put

something in her drink. He got her alone."

"She's not in school today."

"It made her sick. She'll be back next week."

"How come Jason is still here?"

"There's no proof that he did it, and Chief Hopper can't do anything about it because it didn't happen in Hawkins."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. I mean, the chief's gonna keep an eye on him and hit him with whatever he can get away with, but –"

"But it's not the same," Chris finished. "Yeah. Anyway, we just wanted you to know that we know she wouldn't do that, even if she wasn't with you."

Steve gave him a tight smile. "Thanks. She'd appreciate that. She'll probably need to know that when she comes back to school."

---

It wasn't until after gym that Steve lost all control. Of course it was Tommy who started everything. He'd been leaving both Steve and Jessica alone lately, but with all the rumors going around Steve should've known he was going to say something.

Gym itself was fine. They had run a few laps around the track and then had had the rest of the period to do what they wanted as long as they were being physically active. Once they hit the locker rooms, however, Tommy switched to full on jerk mode.

He tapped Steve of the shoulder as he passed by.

"Where's your girlfriend today? You two are usually attached at the hip."

"You know where she is, Tommy. She's at home sick."

"Hm. You know, I saw her go off with Donovan yesterday. Looks like

she had fun without you."

"It's funny, no one's mentioning that someone slipped something in her drink and that he followed her."

"Donovan slipped her something?" Tommy shrugged. "Guess he knew he couldn't get it any other –"

Steve couldn't help it. He shoved Tommy against the nearest locker and held him there.

"When are you gonna learn to shut your mouth?"

Steve was tempted to just change and leave without showering. He could skip his last two periods, and he would have if he hadn't had to get Jessica's assignments for her. Tommy was a jerk; Steve couldn't even remember why he'd ever considered him a friend.

Tommy shoved him back, suddenly, and the back of Steve's calves hit the wooden bench in between the rows of lockers. If the bench had been any higher, he probably would've lost his footing.

"It's too bad Byers broke it up. Maybe Donovan could've helped loosen her up a little. She's wound so tight, you know. Are you not doing it for her, Stevie?"

That was it. Steve threw the first punch. He didn't care if he got in trouble. Tommy couldn't just say those things and get away with it, not when Jason Donovan was already going to get away with what he'd done.

Steve ended up with bruised knuckles and a busted lip, but Tommy ended up with a scrape along the side of his face. Somehow Steve had gotten him good enough for his cheek to hit the metal of the locker, and he'd walked away worse than Steve had. The coach had heard the commotion – or maybe someone had gone to get him – and had broken up their fight. It might have been worse if they hadn't been interrupted.

They were both sent to the nurse and then to the office, Steve with ice for his hand, and Tommy with a strip of white gauze taped to his face. The principal had decided that they all needed to talk about

what had happened. Steve and Tommy started talking at the same time and continued until the principal shouted overtop of them.

Steve told his side of the story first and then Tommy told an edited version of his own: he was just messing around; he didn't think Steve would have such a fit over it.

"This is not the first fight you two have had on school grounds. We do not condone violence, Mr. Harrington. That being said, Mr. Hall, the things you said are absolutely repulsive. What happened to Miss Henderson should never be allowed to happen to anyone, and you tried to pass it off as a joke."

Considering no one had been seriously injured – not even Tommy with the scrape along his face – neither boy was suspended, but they were given a week's worth of detention. Steve would have to fix that with his baseball coach, so that he wouldn't be penalized for it, but he was completely fine with his punishment. It would start the following Monday for them both.

They were free to go back to class, with the knowledge that if they got in trouble again there would be much steeper consequences.

---

Jessica was bored stiff by the time Steve got to her house that day. She'd gone back to sleep for a couple of hours after he'd gone to school that morning, but after that she'd gone downstairs, planted herself on the couch, and had been watching TV since then.

She had not eaten, not like she'd told Steve she would, but it wasn't because she hadn't wanted to. She'd tried some soup, but it hadn't hit her stomach well, and she hadn't been able to take in more than a few spoonfuls. She'd been able to keep water down, though, so her mom made sure she kept a glass beside her at all times. Her mom stayed with her while she was downstairs and watched whatever Jessica wanted to watch.

Hopper had come by to drop her car off and had even come in to see her for a minute or two, but he hadn't been able to stay long.

Steve got home way earlier than she thought he would be – around

three, instead of five – and hoped he hadn't skipped baseball practice just to come back to her. When he walked in the door and she saw that his bottom lip was hurt baseball practice flew out of her mind.

"Steve? What happened to you?" Jessica's mother had beaten her to the punch there.

"Uh, just a small disagreement. Boys being boys, Ms. H. It's been sorted out."

Jessica watched her mom stand up and beckon Steve over. He was almost a head foot taller than her mom – much like he was to Jessica herself – but it didn't stop her mom from reaching up and moving his head so she could get a better look at his wound.

"Well, it doesn't look like it's going to swell."

"Honestly, it's fine. I'm fine. It doesn't even really hurt."

Steve, who'd had his backpack strapped over his right shoulder and his jacket draped over his forearm, let his backpack fall down over his jacket and then put both at the end of the couch near Jessica's feet. The knuckles of his right hand were red and purple.

"Your hand doesn't look fine," Jessica said, which just caused her mom to look at that too.

"Did you put ice on it, at least?"

"Yes. Like I said, I'm fine."

"Okay. I'm going to just assume you had a good reason for getting into this fight. I don't want you to start solving things with throwing punches."

"No, Ma'am. I mean, yes Ma'am, there was a good reason, and no that's not how I like to solve things."

"Good." Jessica's mom smiled. "I'm glad you're back. Jessica has been going crazy not being able to do anything but lie around."

Jessica rolled her eyes but gave Steve a shrug when he looked her

way. Her mom wasn't that far off. She moved her feet, pulling them in closer, when Steve made to sit beside her, and then tucked her toes under his leg once he got settled.

Her mom went in the kitchen, probably to make a sandwich or something because she normally did that when Steve came over after school, and they were left alone.

"So . . . what happened?"

"Tommy."

"Ah."

That was pretty much all he needed to say. Tommy hadn't bothered her in a couple months, but now . . . now he had ammunition to throw their way, so of course he was going to. She was glad she hadn't been there to witness it.

"How bad is it? What are people saying?"

"Jess . . ."

"I need to know before I go back, Steve."

"Well, then, I'll tell you over the weekend, okay? Just don't worry about it right now. Just know that Tommy said something that I couldn't let him get away with, so I didn't."

It must have been bad-bad. The last time Steve had thrown a punch Tommy's way was when he'd basically threatened her with bodily harm.

Jessica sat up, situating herself so she could lean her head against his shoulder, and then grabbed his injured hand. She very gently kissed his bruised knuckles before placing their joined hands on her lap.

"Was he just being a jerk-face?"

He scoffed. "A big jerk-face. More than usual."

"Wow."

Her mom came back out then. She was carrying two sandwiches on one plate. She placed them on the coffee table and turned to Steve.

"She hasn't really eaten anything."

"Mom!"

"Well, you haven't." Then to Steve, "What would you like to drink?"

"Uh, Coke?"

Once her mom had gone back to the kitchen, Steve looked at Jess and then gestured at the sandwiches. They were turkey and cheese, with what looked like mayo. Perfectly good sandwiches.

"I tried to eat," Jessica said. "My stomach didn't like it."

Steve still convinced her to try a few bites of the sandwich, and that's all she could do. She gave him the rest.

---

Once Dustin got home, he plopped on the couch beside Steve and Jessica and when he noticed Steve's face, he asked what happened. Steve told him basically the truth. Tommy had said something unforgivable and Steve had had to take care of it.

"Hey, so Nancy told me Mike started a food fight yesterday," Jessica said. "What was that about?"

"I mean, it wasn't a big deal," Dustin said. "And he didn't really start a food fight – or he didn't mean to."

Jessica waited for him to continue.

"He was trying to take his sandwich out of the lunchroom. Food isn't allowed outside the cafeteria, so when he got caught with it, he sort of just threw it back in. It hit somebody and . . . there it went."

Okay, so maybe he hadn't meant to start a food fight, but he had shown a blatant disrespect for rules. If he'd been that way his whole life, Jessica wouldn't have bat an eyelash over it, but it wasn't like Mike to act that way. It wasn't like any of Dustin's friends to act that



way.

"Well, just don't let him get you in trouble. Okay?"

"Says you. You were friends with Steve when all he was was trouble."

"Hey!" Steve said. "Rude."

Jessica laughed at Steve's reaction, which was basically just cursory because there had been no real intent to harm in Dustin's words.

"I was, and I never let him get me in trouble. All I'm saying is that I don't want to one day hear about you causing a food fight. Got it?"

"Yes, oh wise sister." Dustin grinned before becoming serious again. "How were you today?"

"Mostly okay. My stomach still doesn't like food, and I'm really tired, but . . . all things considered . . ."

Steve squeezed her hand and she looked up at him. She knew that he was thinking the same thing she was: that even though Jason had done things he never should've been allowed to do . . . he could have done so much worse.

---

Later that night, in Jessica's room, she and Steve were sitting on the bed with their books open in front of them. They were doing math homework.

"How is it that you missed today and you still know how to do this better than I do?" Steve asked.

Jessica shrugged. "Maybe because you have a genius for a girlfriend."

"Hm. Should I be intimidated? I feel I should be intimidated."

She softly elbowed him in his side. "Steve!"

He gently elbowed her back. "Jess!" he mocked. And then more seriously, he said, "Anyway, we can't both be stupid, so . . . it balances out, you being a genius."

Jessica knew he probably meant it as a joke, but . . . he hadn't sounded like he was joking when he'd said it. She knew he had trouble in school, but it wasn't like he didn't try – at least not anymore. He tried very hard.

"Steve. You're not stupid. Just because you don't understand this type of math doesn't mean you're stupid. It just means you don't understand this type of math. And . . . honestly, it's not like we're ever gonna use it anyway."

"Yeah? I suck at English, too, though. And I do need that."

"You do okay. You have trouble with the writing part, and you hate reading. That doesn't make you stupid either. And . . . you're good at the classes you care about, that you actually like."

"So none of the important classes then?"

"You've been doing better since you've been doing your homework with me," she said, and she wasn't lying.

She didn't know where all this was coming from, but she wasn't going to have him thinking he was stupid. She moved a little closer to him and lifted her chin up a bit like she always did when she wanted a kiss. She noticed as a gentle grin overtook his mouth and he leaned forward to meet her.

It was just a brush of skin against skin at first, until he pressed against her more firmly. She leaned back slowly. When her head touched down on her pillow she brought her hands up to lock around the back of his neck. She played with the hair there and felt him shiver against her.

Their lips moved lazily against each other and Steve let out a soft groan when she opened her mouth to him, but he pulled away – just enough to look at her.

"Is this okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Jess . . ."

She knew he didn't want to bring up what had happened the day before – especially when they were kissing – but she was also thankful that he would even think about how it might affect her and how she might feel while being kissed.

"I'm okay. I swear I would let you know if I wasn't. Kissing is – kissing is good."

"Hm." He leaned back down then and, before allowing himself to touch her lips again, he said, "Kissing is great."

## 23. Chapter 23

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Friday was an interesting day of school as well, but not for the same reason as Thursday had been. Sure, there were rumors still going around, only now there was a rumor about Jessica having been drugged as well. Steve was completely cool with that, since it wasn't a false rumor, and people needed to be warned – girls needed to know about Jason so they would be aware when he was around them.

What made it even more interesting was that the word 'rapist' had been written on Jason Donovan's locker. Steve noticed it when he walked by it – and how could he not have? It was in all capital letters, written in black, going from the top of his locker all the way to the bottom of it.

Steve didn't know for sure who had done it, but he could safely say he didn't think Nancy or Jonathan would have. One of his team members might have, and most of the boys in the locker room had heard about the drugs when he'd fought with Tommy the day before. All Steve knew was that he hadn't done it, and he didn't care that someone had. It served Jason right, having it out there like that, because even if he hadn't had his way with Jessica . . . he had tried to and that was bad enough. He would've done it had Jonathan not interrupted.

Another interesting thing that happened that day is that Carol publicly broke up with Tommy. She'd heard about what Tommy had said and let him know how awful it had been. Sure, Carol wasn't the best or most mature person her own self, but she definitely let Tommy know what for when she smacked him across the face in the hallway between third and fourth period.

"I don't know what the big deal is," Tommy said.

"The big deal is that you basically said it's okay to drug a girl if she won't have sex with you any other way!" Carol screamed. "It's disgusting. Is that what you would do to me if I decided I didn't want

to have sex with you?"

They went back and forth like that for a few minutes before Carol let him have it, and then she walked away. Steve had never thought he'd see the day that Tommy would do something so bad that Carol would call him out on it, but it had happened.

It just about made his day. Even when he was called to the principal's office and even when he saw that Hopper was standing there in his work attire his mood wasn't spoiled. He already knew what it was about, and he knew he hadn't done it so he was going to be fine.

"Hey, Steve," Hopper said. "I can tell you know why I'm here."

"I'm assuming it's about the wonderful piece of artwork that was left on Donovan's locker."

Hopper's mouth twitched, but he didn't smile. It wouldn't have been professional. It was still nice to know that Hopper probably wasn't even going to do anything much about it; he was on their side.

"Do you know anything about it?"

"Nope. It was already there when I got here this morning."

The principal, who was behind his desk, cleared his throat. "You realize no one really suspects you. I had to call you in because of your connection to Miss Henderson and because of what happened yesterday between you and Mr. Hall. I had to appear fair, and Chief Hopper has to appear to be chasing every lead."

To Hopper, the principal said, "The janitor is the one who saw the writing first. The bus riders are usually the first students to arrive on any given day. You can put out word to the students to let you know if anyone saw anything, but unless someone comes forward, we will probably never know who did it."

Steve was completely fine with that. He hoped no one came forward; he was thankful to whoever had exposed Jason for what he was.

---

The rest of the day went by uneventfully, and Donovan's locker had

been cleaned by the time school was let out. Steve went to baseball practice mainly because he had to let his coach in on his detention for the next week, and then he was back at Jessica's by five-thirty.

She was feeling a little better and was able to hold food down, at least, even if she didn't feel like doing anything other than staying in and listening to music or watching TV.

Steve stayed with her Friday night, but his parents had come home for a few days, so he went home Saturday night. He didn't even mention detention to his parents because it wasn't like they would care, anyway, as long as it didn't cause any problems with the coach. It wouldn't really be a problem at all – detention lasted an hour, so he could still make the second half of practices.

On Sunday, Steve received a call from Nancy asking if it was okay to go see Jessica.

"Well, why don't you call and ask her?"

"I did. She said she was fine, but I wanted to make sure. I knew you weren't over there, so I figured you'd be home. Is she okay enough for me to go see her?"

"Yeah. She's still a little weak, but she's up watching TV and stuff. I, uh, still don't know if she remembers anything. She hasn't said anything if she does."

She had promised to tell him if she wasn't okay, and Steve believed that she would, but he also thought that she might not want to talk about what had happened with him, might not want to talk about it with a guy, period. Maybe Nancy going over would be a good thing.

"Hey, uh, I never told her about what happened at school. I mean, she knows people were talking because people always talk, but nothing specific. And she doesn't know anything about Friday."

"Okay . . ." He heard the hesitation in Nancy's voice. "Does that mean you want me to tell her or that you don't want me to say anything?"

"If she asks, I mean, don't lie to her, but I was kind of hoping I could tell her. I told her I would, so . . ."

"Okay."

---

Jessica was just getting started on what was left of her homework when Nancy showed up. She'd known the girl was coming, having talked to her recently on the phone, so she wasn't surprised by the visit.

Nancy didn't interrupt her school work; she just sat with her while she continued. Jessica knew that Nancy wanted to know how she was doing, but she was glad that she didn't just ask outright.

To be honest, Jessica felt mostly fine. She was a little nervous to get back to school, mostly because of what Steve had said about people talking. She'd known they would, but from Steve's reaction it had to be bad. Steve wasn't violent in most circumstances.

They made small talk for about fifteen minutes, but Jessica eventually pushed her textbook away.

"Hey, uh, I never got a chance to thank you guys . . . for not leaving right away. I don't, uh –"

"Jonathan was the one who noticed how you were acting," Nancy said. "I think maybe he suspected, and then we saw, you know, Jason following you."

"Right. I . . . still don't remember everything. Like, I remember wanting to call Steve, and then there are flashes. Uh, I know he kissed me and that he was trying to . . . If you guys hadn't come, he would've –"

She was having trouble saying the word it was like it literally got stuck in her throat and couldn't make it past her lips.

"You don't have to say it," Nancy said, reaching over to grab her hand. "And . . . for what it's worth . . . people at school know what he did. It was all over the school Friday. I mean, obviously people are going to believe what they want to believe, but the people who know you know what happened."

"Oh."

That was good. People needed to know what Jason had done, that it wasn't safe for girls to be around him. She would have preferred him to have some kind of legal punishment, but if she couldn't have that, then having people know what he'd done so they'd stay away from him was the next best thing.

---

Steve had stayed at home Sunday for as long as he could. He made it through dinner, at least, but then he had to get out of there. His mom was working on some charity event thing, which didn't involve him, and his dad had locked himself away in his office.

They had made very stilted conversation at dinner, mostly about how baseball was going and whether or not he thought he could keep his grades up. To be fair, if he didn't have Jessica helping him, he probably wouldn't have been able to, but now he studied more because he studied with her.

He ended up calling Jessica, mostly to see if Nancy had left already, which she had, but also to see if she maybe wanted to go out that night, maybe for a milkshake.

"I don't know, Steve. I don't really want to be around people right now."

"Well . . . what if we just go in, grab the milkshakes, and then go somewhere else? We can just drive around even, if you want."

"That sounds better. I'll be ready when you get here." There was a pause, during which Steve thought maybe she was done talking, but then she said, "Is it that bad? Your parents?"

"No worse than normal. We talked for a little over dinner and then went our separate ways."

"Oh. Well, come pick me up and save yourself."

"On my way."

---

Jessica's mom stopped her as she made her way from the kitchen to the stairs.



"You're going out?"

"Uh, yeah. Milkshakes with Steve. We might drive around a bit."

"Oh."

Her mom sounded serious but cautious and Jessica didn't know what to do with that.

"Mom? I – is everything okay? I mean, it's okay that I go, right?"

"Of course." Her mom gave her a small smile. "Just . . . stay with Steve, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure, um . . ."

Jessica's eyes started burning and her throat suddenly felt clogged and she wanted to rush up the stairs before she burst into tears like she knew she was going to do, but she felt rooted to the spot.

"It's just I don't want you getting hurt," her mom said. "And I know that sounds silly, it won't happen again, you're careful and he's careful, but you –"

The dam broke and Jessica felt her face scrunch up as the first tear fell. She'd sort of been numb since the whole incident at the bowling alley, she hadn't really allowed herself to feel anything, but she felt it now.

"Mom!"

She could've been raped. What had happened was bad enough, but it could've been so much worse. She'd had hands and lips forced on her. She'd had hands and lips that weren't Steve's, hands and lips that weren't gentle and tender – hands and lips that had wanted to hurt her.

And now here her mom was showing her how worried she was for her to just go out with Steve, and the thing was . . . Jessica was worried too. She didn't want to run into anyone from school, didn't want to know what they were saying or what they thought even if Nancy had tried to assure her that everyone knew what Jason was

and what he'd done to her, that the ones who mattered knew.

And the thing was . . . Jessica had never cared what other people thought about her, but she cared about this. It mattered what people thought about this situation.

Before she knew it, she'd been led to the couch and was sobbing in her mother's arms. She could tell her mother was crying too.

All the while, Jessica was wondering if she was having this much trouble just going to get a milkshake, how was she ever going to make it in school the next day?

---

Needless to say, Jessica was not ready when Steve got there. She was, however, up in her room getting ready.

He had knocked on the front door like he normally did. Also like normal, he didn't wait for anyone to open the door; he just went on in. Ms. Henderson was seated on the couch and Steve could tell right away that something wasn't right. She didn't greet him like she usually did when he came over, and her eyes were rimmed with red.

"She's upstairs. She should be down in a minute. I held her up for a few minutes after you two got off the phone, so she's running a little late."

"That's okay. There's no rush."

"I think – I think you'll need to be really careful with her tonight. She's –" Ms. Henderson glanced toward the stairs, as if checking to see if Jessica was coming down yet; she wasn't –" she's fragile. It finally hit her, what happened."

"Oh, I –" Steve was so far out of his element with this. "Should we not go out? If she's not feeling up to it . . ."

"No, she probably needs to. I know she's worried about it, but she needs to go out. She still has to go to school in the morning."

Steve nodded and gestured towards the stairs. "Can I?"

"Of course."

So Steve did. He made his way quickly up the stairs and to Jessica's room. The door was open, so he knew she was decent. He tapped his knuckles against the door anyway.

She was standing in the middle of her room, fully dressed and pulling her hair into a messy pony tail. When she looked at him, he noticed that her eyes were red as well. She and her mother had both been crying.

He didn't hesitate. He stepped in the room and just kept going until he made it to her. He held his arms out and she basically fell into them. She grabbed onto the front of his shirt and just held on, fists clenched tightly against the material.

"He was all over me, Steve," she said, her voice muffled from where her face was pressed against him. "His hands, and . . . I'm not okay, Steve. I thought I was, but I'm not because it's there in my head."

"I thought you didn't remember it," he said.

"I don't really, and it's only flashes, but Mom said something, and I just – I don't know."

Steve drew soothing circles on her back where his hands had landed when he'd embraced her. He knew she was crying again, and he hated it, especially since he didn't know how to make it better.

"I kind of don't want to go to school tomorrow," she said. "I don't want to risk seeing him."

Steve stopped rubbing her back then, but only so he could grab her shoulders and push her away enough so they could see each other.

"Jess, you're going to be fine. Okay? I know you're not right now because he's got you all messed up in the head, but . . . you took on a literal monster last November. Remember? A literal monster, not some stupid jock who had to stoop to using drugs to try and get at you. You did that, with a machete."

That was it. That was all he had: his belief that she would be okay.

He hoped that his words would help her, that she would realize that she had faced other tough things and had gotten through them, so she would get through this too.

---

It took a few minutes for Jessica to calm back down enough to step away from Steve, but when she did, she grabbed her leather jacket and slipped it on.

They made their way back downstairs, where they both said bye to her mom, and then they went to his car. He opened the door for her so she could get in and then closed it once she was settled.

Jessica sat there in silence as Steve got in his side, started the car, and started driving. She reached for his hand, though, and he let her have it.

"Steve?"

"Hm?"

"Can we just drive around? I don't know if I can do a milkshake right now."

"Sure." He squeezed her hand. "So, do you want to know about school now or –"

"Yes. That way we can enjoy the rest of the drive."

Once Steve told her what had happened on Thursday and Friday – that the rumors had basically gone from people thinking she and Jason had gone off together, which wasn't true at all, to basically the truth, which was that he'd followed her and had drugged her – Jessica realized that she'd been worrying for nothing.

When he told her about the word that had been spray-painted on Jason's locker, she relaxed even more. Maybe the next day wouldn't be so bad after all.

## 24. Chapter 24

Okay, so . . . I'm giving the chapter an M rating for some type of smut at the bottom of this. I totally didn't plan for it to happen, but it just did. I'll signal for when it starts and ends if you want to skip it, but yeah . . .

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Steve and Jessica met in the school parking lot Monday morning. That was what they normally did, so there was nothing unusual about that, and the first half of the day passed by without a problem.

At lunch, they sat with Nancy and Jonathan. Jonathan usually didn't even eat in the lunch room; he usually spent his lunch period outside or in the dark room developing pictures. That day, though, he seemed okay to sit with them. He mostly seemed to want to see how Jessica was.

"I'm okay." She sent Jonathan a small smile. "I never got to thank you for watching out for me. So, thank you."

As usual when someone was being nice to him, he didn't know what to do with it.

"I'm glad I could help. You didn't deserve that. I mean, no one deserves that, but –"

"I know what you mean."

She felt Steve's hand on her leg then, right above her knee, and she turned to look at him. The look he was giving her was a soft, adoring one, and she couldn't help the bright smile that took over her face or the heat that filled her cheeks.

The drive the night before had helped her a lot. Once they'd talked about school and what everyone was saying, she'd been able to relax a little. They'd even sang along to the radio for a bit, not even trying to hit the notes right. It had been fun; it had been what she needed.

She leaned over to kiss him quickly on the lips before going back to

eating what the school called pizza.

After lunch, she and Steve had gym. He walked her to the door of the girl's locker room, as he usually did. She went in, changed quickly, and felt her heart almost stop when she saw that the gym floor was basically covered in mats. She knew what that meant. They were starting gymnastics.

They still had to run the track for the first half of class, which sucked, but she decided she'd rather run than try to do flips and fail. Didn't the coach know that some people just weren't coordinated enough for this stuff? Someone could get hurt – someone, meaning her.

Sadly, gymnastics was a requirement; she at least had to try.

She did two laps around the track with Steve before they headed back inside. The first thing the coach said was that they were going to be working on handstands, so everyone needed to tuck their shirts into their shorts – especially the girls. Nobody needed a show.

Jessica groaned. "I'm gonna break my neck. Steve, you're holding my legs."

Steve grinned. "I wonder if coach knows he's helping people practice for keg stands."

"No, he's not!" Then she thought about it, and realized he was right. Steve did handstands all the time when he was drinking. "Hey, you think if I bring that up, he won't make us do it?"

"Hey, it's an easy A. I'll spot you, so you don't fall, and everything will be okay."

Jessica huffed in semi-annoyance. "Fine. But, also, we just had lunch. This can't be good for the digestion."

Really, she would say anything to get out of gym class or anything dealing with gym that involved more than walking.

After everyone had more or less mastered the art of staying up on their own – even Jessica did once she got her balance – the coach decided it was time to try cartwheels. It pleased Jessica to know that

she wasn't the only one who didn't seem to be able to do it at all the first time. Many people fell or weren't able to land properly.

Jessica didn't know the point of doing gymnastics unless one was planning on becoming a gymnast, but since it was required, she had to do it.

Finally, gym was over and she was able to go back to the girl's room and change. She hadn't really worked up a sweat at all because it was still pretty cool outside and the gymnastics hadn't been a work out either aside from learning to keep her balance.

And that was when her day turned from slightly annoying to bad. She didn't have her next class with Steve, so she never really waited for him because she knew he usually took a shower after gym – just a quick one to rinse of the sweat from his body, because he did usually sweat during gym - and that day had been no different.

That was when she'd basically run into the guys that had been at the bowling alley – Jason and the ones who had been with him. She'd seen him around that day, of course, because they went to the same school, walked the same halls, but she'd been able to avoid direct contact until then.

But there he was, standing there in front of a group of lockers. She didn't know if one of them was his or not, and she didn't really care, but she didn't want to walk past him at all. She was sorely tempted just to go into the nearest classroom and wait for him to leave even if it meant she would be late. If she could avoid letting him see her, it would be worth it.

But then the best and worst thing happened. He looked her way, and when he did, he had such a smug look on his face that her fear was suddenly replaced with anger. She no longer wanted to run and hide. She wanted to slap his stupid face. She didn't think she'd ever been so angry. She couldn't believe she'd wasted time crying over him.

She actually marched right up to him and said, "You're disgusting, you know that? You knew you'd never stand a chance with me, so you drugged me."

"Hm. Good luck proving it." Jason brought his hand to her neck then, braiding his fingers through her hair, much like he had the night he'd drugged her. "You're making a scene, Henderson. What will people say now?"

"Don't touch me!"

She shoved him away, hard, and because he wasn't expecting it his back hit the lockers. She felt his hand tug at her hair as he was pushed and it made her hiss in surprise. She hadn't been expecting it.

"Hey, you came to me, so don't act like that wasn't what you wanted."

And that was when she slapped him. She had never hit a person before, but she had put the full force of her body into it, and his head snapped to the side. His skin was already turning red and she felt an insane need to grin. Steve had been right. She'd faced a monster before, and Jason? Jason was just a stupid jock.

"That was what I wanted."

At some point, people had gathered around to watch what was going on even though the bell was about to ring. She didn't know what people would take away from what had happened, but she knew they would know that she didn't welcome Jason's advances in any way.

She'd dropped her bag – she didn't know when – but it didn't matter because one of the people who had gathered around was Steve, and he'd picked it up. He handed it to her silently and they made their way through the crowd. Steve took her hand and she let him lead her away from everyone else. She was being stared at – probably because the Golden Girl had finally lost her temper; no one had ever seen her react like that to anything. She'd never really had a reason to act like that before.

Steve led her to a boy's bathroom and then checked to see if it was clear before letting her in.

"Uh –"

He locked the door and then turned to her.



"Feel better?"

"What?"

"Jason . . . I don't think he knew what hit him."

"Right. He just . . . he looked at me wrong and it made me angry. It was like he knows he's gonna get away with it, and I couldn't let him. How much did you see?"

"Enough to know he touched you without you wanting him to. I thought I was gonna have to do something, but, uh, you took care of it."

"I did, didn't I?" She grinned. "I remembered what you said about him being a stupid jock, the rest was easy."

Steve pulled her to him and she laughed when she hit his chest.

"That's my girl."

---

The rest of the week went by uneventfully. She didn't have any more run-ins with Jason, though everyone was talking about it, and he did show up on Tuesday more messed up than when he'd left on Monday. He had bruises on his face, and he walked with a limp. Steve swore he didn't know anything about it, which was technically true, because he hadn't been a part of it. He was fairly certain, though, that it had something to do with the members of the basketball team.

He never would've used his whole team to go after one guy, but he wasn't going to complain about it. Sure, Jessica had laid into Jason pretty well on her own, but at least now Jason would know that she had other people looking out for her as well.

Things quickly got back to what they considered normal, and Jessica's birthday arrived. Everyone that Jessica wanted there had already been invited, and Steve was taking care of everything. He was going to provide pizza and snacks, while Jessica's mom was bringing the cake and ice cream.

The party was going to happen at noon and last a few hours – Steve

knew that would be about as much socializing as Jessica would want – and then Steve was going to have her for the rest of the day.

Their friends from school arrived first and then the kids arrived. Mike came with Nancy; Will came with Jonathan; Lucas was dropped off by his mom. Dustin came with Jessica and their mom, obviously. Hopper even stopped by for a few minutes, just to check in and to steal a piece of cake, which Jessica found hilarious, so she teased him about it.

Steve played some of Jessica's favorite music, which was fine with everyone – even the kids, and even Jonathan, to a certain extent – and everyone danced for a while. Jonathan and Will tried to get out of it, but Jessica wasn't having it.

"Oh, come on, I'm taking pictures," Jonathan said. "I can't take pictures and dance at the same time."

"Hm." She turned to Will then, who gave her a wide-eyed look. He seemed terrified. "Dance with me?"

"Um –"

"Come on," Dustin suddenly chimed in. "It's fun!"

It was true; Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were already dancing. Will was just shy, and there were a lot of people that he didn't know there.

Jessica grabbed Will's hand but didn't force him to come with her. She just gestured to a semi-open space in the kitchen where they could all dance together, she and the boys. It only took a few minutes for Will to loosen up with his friends around him. Jessica was just glad she was able to do this with them. And of course, Jonathan was off to the side taking pictures. Nancy was standing with him, smiling and sometimes laughing at them dancing.

When a slower song came on, however, the kids sat it out, and Steve stepped in. She wrapped her arms around him and he rested his hands on her waist. They just swayed back and forth, every now and then looking at each other, and she couldn't keep from smiling. She always felt so good in his arms; sometimes she wished they could just

stay that way, close and in their own little world.

Pretty soon the pizza arrived and everyone settled down to eat – some in the living room, some in the kitchen, some on the stairs. There was a little bit of talking going on now and the volume of the music had been lowered so no one had to yell to be heard. The kids stayed together while they ate. Steve and Jessica sat with her mom, since she was really the only adult there. She was really just waiting for Jessica to open her presents, and then she was going to head out.

So after everyone was done eating, Jessica decided to put her mom out of her misery and go ahead and open her presents. Her mom treated birthdays the same way she treated Christmas. Jessica received a few things from her, one being somewhat expensive while the others were less so.

"Open ours first," Dustin said. "We all got together and pitched in. The guys, and Nancy, and Jonathan."

Jessica was given a badly wrapped square thing, which Dustin shrugged at, and began taking the paper off of it. It was a white canvas with her name written there in blue block letters. Around her name words were written, also in blue. They made her tear up.

"Dustin?"

"We just . . . I asked them to come up with what they thought about when they think of you."

The words read: loving, sister, funny, kind, never alone, best friend, happy, always there, smart.

"Guys, seriously, you're gonna make me cry!"

She did cry a little, because the four guys gathered around her and engulfed her in a group hug. Their gift was actually really sweet and thoughtful, and for Dustin to have come up with it meant a lot to her.

Once she was able to get to her next gift, she found out it was the one her mother had spent the most on. It was a silver charm bracelet, the charms circular and rectangular. Right in the middle was a silver plate that had her name engraved onto it. It was really beautiful. It

was shiny.

She grinned and hugged her mom, then let Steve help her put the bracelet on her wrist. The charms kind of jingled against each other when she shook her hand, so she did it a few times just to hear it.

The next present she was handed was wrapped neatly into a square. She could tell it was some kind of clothing by how soft it was.

"This is from us," Chris said, gesturing to the rest of his friends from the basketball team. About four of them had come with him; they were all guys that Jessica had never had a problem with and had even hung out with on occasion when she'd gone to parties.

She was curious as to what type of clothing they would've gotten her, so she quickly ripped the paper off. It was a Hawkins High School Athlete sweatshirt. It was dark green with white letters.

"Um . . ."

"Turn it over," Steve said, and she looked up at him. He was grinning so he had to already know what it said.

She turned it over. At the top where a person's last name should be was her last name, HENDERSON, and below it was the number eighteen.

"Does this mean I'm an honorary member of your team?" she teased.

"Well, yeah. You kind of have been ever since you started dating Steve," Chris said.

Today was just a day for tears, she guessed, because she felt like crying again. They were good tears, though, so she guessed she didn't mind.

She thanked the team and hugged each of them, Chris the longest because she knew him the best.

She continued opening presents – she got a few things of make-up that she would actually use, a couple of band T-shirts, things like that – and Steve's present was the only one she had left. He wanted her to

open it later once everyone left. It made her wonder what it was.

---

Once Jessica's mom left Steve turned the music up again. People took the cue to start dancing again.

Jessica was standing off to the side with Nancy and Jonathan, so that was where Steve went.

"Are we having fun?" he asked the group as a whole.

Jessica nodded. "It's been good."

She grabbed his hand and leaned against him, put her head on his shoulder briefly. Of course, Jonathan snapped a picture.

"You always do that when I'm not ready," Jessica complained.

"And they always turn out great."

"He's not wrong," Steve said.

The party lasted about another hour and then people started trickling out. Steve saw everyone out because he was a good host, and eventually the only people left were the kids and their siblings. Nancy and Mike left first, but Jonathan and Will followed not long after. Dustin went with them so they could drop him off. Lucas was last to leave.

As soon as everyone was gone Jessica pretty much collapsed into Steve and they settled on the couch. Music was still playing softly in the background, but it was more soothing than anything else.

"You okay?"

"Mm. I'm good. I had fun even if I did cry twice."

Steve held her tighter as she buried her face in his neck. He had to hold back a laugh as she began nuzzling against him; it was so soft, it tickled. She noticed and looked up at him, a soft smile on her face.

"I liked the party, but we didn't get to do much of this," she said.

She leaned up and kissed him. It was true; there had been too much going on for them to really have been able to enjoy their time together as a couple, aside from their dance. It wasn't a bad thing. There had just been other things they'd been doing. But now they were alone, so they could just enjoy being close.

Steve maneuvered them so he could have easy access to her neck because he knew she loved when he paid special attention to the skin there. Her hands found their way to his hair, and he continued kissing up and down her throat as far as he could go, considering her shirt got in the way once he reached a certain point.

She eventually guided his lips back to hers, and he felt when she pulled him with her as she leaned back on the cushions. They usually ended up in a horizontal position when they kissed now, and they usually had to stop before things heated up too much because they were normally only together like that at her house where her mom or Dustin could interrupt at any point, but no one was there with them now.

~Smut starts here~

Her legs were spread for him and he was comfortably seated between them, just content to be so close to her and that she seemed comfortable with it as well. Her hands fell to his back, near the bottom of his shirt. She slid them slightly underneath the material, and her nails scratched softly against his skin. His hips jerked forward, meeting hers briefly, and she froze beneath him.

She removed her hands from beneath his shirt and turned her head from him, just enough to break the kiss, and he noticed she was flushed and breathless, her lips a little swollen and pinker than normal.

"Was that not okay?" she asked.

"What?"

His own voice was husky and rough. The thing was that something like that, her scratching his back, would have always felt good to him, but he'd literally been without sex for three months, which

shouldn't have been a big deal, really, but he hadn't gone without it for so long since he'd had sex the first time, and so it felt really good now. Normally, a touch like that would've felt nice, sure, but it wouldn't have sent a serious amount of desire through his body.

"I'm not – we've never . . . underneath our clothes."

Watching her stumble over her words like that had his love for her mixing with his desire, and he was reminded that this was all new to her. They hadn't done more than mostly innocent petting over clothes, and it made sense for her to not know what was good and what might not be.

"No, that was good. So good."

"Okay. Good." She seemed relieved; it was endearing. "Kiss me again."

Since he'd established that it was okay for her to touch him, to really touch his skin, she didn't hesitate to put her hands back underneath his shirt and continue to scratch and caress. It drove him a little insane.

She allowed him to touch her also, her stomach and her sides, and he grinned against her skin as her breath stuttered the closer he got to her breasts. He stopped there, though, his fingers at her ribs, before looking up at her to see if it was okay to go on.

Her eyes were closed, but she opened them soon enough once she realized that he was obviously looking for permission.

"Jess?"

"It's so okay." She squirmed beneath them. "Please."

Steve ever so lightly brushed his thumbs across the underside of her breasts. She still had her bra on, but she still responded by letting out a small gasp and arching against his hands.

"Steve!"

Until then, they'd both sort of had their lower bodies under control – Steve had deliberately not moved against her much – but now with

her sort of rolling her hips there was no way he couldn't respond, and there was no way she wouldn't feel it. He fit against her so well, and she seemed to know it because she wrapped her legs around his waist and just held him there tight against her for a minute as he went back to kissing her lips and kneading her breasts.

She let out a small hiccup of a breath as he played with her nipples, which had hardened as soon as he'd really touched them. Then she was sliding her hips against his again, and Steve felt like he could fly. He'd never been this turned on before, especially not while he was clothed.

He became aware then that Jessica was trembling beneath him and he knew he needed to check in again, so he pulled away from their kiss and placed his hands back at her sides. He squeezed gently, hoping to comfort her.

"Jess?"

Her eyes were wet. She was . . . crying – she was not supposed to be crying. What had he done wrong? She was still moving against him, though, so he gripped her firmly to keep her still.

"Don't. I want – I want so much," she said. "We can't, but I want –"

And he understood then. Her body was experiencing pleasure for the first time and she was reaching for something she'd never had before. It was overwhelming her. He knew how to give her what she wanted if she'd let him, so that's what he offered.

"Please, I'm – please!"

Steve let go of her hips so he could reach the front of her jeans. Even though she'd already said yes, he still hesitated before undoing them.

"You still with me?"

"Yes."

"A'right, I got you."

Once he'd unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, he slowly slid his hand



down the front of them. She arched against his hand and he felt how hot and wet she was even through her underwear. He wasn't even being touched at the moment and he still felt he could come apart with her at any moment.

He was able to touch her well enough through her panties and she didn't ask him for anything else. She just moved against his hand. And Steve? Steve was just mesmerized by the way her body moved and the way her face had been overtaken with pleasure. It took him by surprise when she finally reached her peak because she basically just grabbed his wrist and held him there firmly against her. It was probably the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

She let out a soft cry as she basically collapsed back against couch. She was still trembling, but her eyes were no longer wet. She actually seemed quite peaceful. He had given her that; she had allowed him to give her that. She still had hold of his wrist, and she was still slightly moving against his hand, giving herself time to come completely down from what had just happened. She was beautiful.

He gently pulled his wrist away, grabbed her hand, and softly lowered himself back onto her just so she could feel he was there. She looked at him then, a soft and sleepy smile on her face, and kissed him.

"Was that – was that what you wanted to give me?" She grinned. "Because that was great."

"What?"

"Earlier you said you wanted to give me my gift after everyone left."

"Oh! No, that – that's not – I didn't plan for that to happen."

"Oh." She was still breathless. She moved against him then and Steve couldn't help but grunt. "You didn't –" She sat up a little and reached a hand down, only to stop at the button of his jeans. "Can I?"

Steve was going to faint. He'd put his own pleasure on the backburner so he could help Jess with hers, but now it was coming back fully.

"I, uh – yeah!"

He had been going to give her an out if she had wanted one, he probably should have, but he knew she wouldn't have offered if she hadn't wanted to anyway.

"Scooch up," she said, pushing against him a little, and he sat backwards so he landed on his bottom and she was now straddling his legs.

Maybe he had died and gone to heaven.

Jessica had his jeans done in record time and had pushed her way into them and felt him against his shorts. She watched as Steve's head fell back and his neck stretched prettily. She latched her mouth onto it and couldn't help but smile when he let out a long groan. Apparently, he was going to be vocal. She couldn't say she hated it.

She ran her palm up and down his length, just to get a feel for it, and she could tell he was long and thick. She could also tell she wouldn't be able to do much through the material.

She ended up bringing her hand back out only to push at the fabric of his jeans to get Steve's attention.

"Can I?"

He lifted his hips up and she brought his jeans and shorts down. She tried not to stare as a certain part of his anatomy sprung up to rest against his stomach, but she failed that test. She felt nervous and shy all of a sudden, and didn't know what to do with herself – or with Steve apparently.

"Steve? I'm – I want –" She looked at him, and saw that he was looking at her now too. "Help me make you feel good?"

She knew what to do theoretically, but what if she did it wrong? What did Steve like? Did he like it fast or slow? How tight did he want to be held?

She brought her hand up so she could grasp him and was surprised by how silky his skin was there, and by how hot he was. It also

surprised her that he jerked in her hand from just being held by her. He was sensitive. Though if he was feeling the way she had then she could completely understand why he was.

"Jess, there's literally nothing you can do right now that I won't like," he said.

His face was flushed a pretty pink. She didn't think she'd ever seen Steve flushed before, not even from exercise, and she kind of wanted to keep him that way.

"Okay, but tell me if I do something wrong."

She started a very cautious rhythm, but when Steve didn't say anything against it she grew more confident. She started caressing his stomach and chest, too, as he began moving his hips to the movements of her hand. It was kind of hot, and it made her stomach feel funny, kind of like it had when she'd been moving with him earlier. She had liquid heat running between her thighs and it wasn't altogether unwelcome. They had started something now, and sooner or later they would have to finish it.

"You look so good like this," she said. His hair had become messed up at some point and it did it for her for some reason.

That seemed to be it for Steve. Her jerked hard against her hand and then he was coming apart, long spurts of white shooting out of him to cover her hand. She continued stroking until his body relaxed, and by then, he'd ruined his shirt. She decided to clean her hand off there as well, since he'd have to wash it anyway.

He was panting heavily even as he pulled her face towards him so he could kiss her. It was the sloppiest kiss they'd ever shared.

"Are you okay?"

She'd never seen him so out of breath or out of sorts. She'd never seen his body so limp before either, like there was no stress there at all. She completely got it, though, because she'd felt that way too.

"I'm perfect. You're perfect."

She laughed as warmth spread through her. This had ended up being her best birthday ever.

~smut stops here~

Steve had planned on taking Jessica to the skating place they had gone for their first date, but that was out now. They were both tired from their recent exertion. They were just going to hang out at his house until it was time to take her home. They watched Grease because it was one of her favorites, and then he was able to give her his present for her.

This was also a purely-by-chance gift. He'd been going past a store window and had happened to be looking at it, and it had reminded him of Jessica and something they had done together, so he'd bought it. He knew she would like it, he just hoped she got why he'd gotten it, why it had reminded him of her.

It was in a long blue box, and when she opened it, he could tell she knew why he'd bought it. In the box was a silver chain with a snowflake pendant on it. In the middle of the snowflake was a blue gem.

"Our snow fight," she said. "You guys cheated."

"Did not," he said.

He was glad it was something they could laugh about.

She held the chain up so she could examine the snowflake.

"It's so pretty." She held it out to him. "Put it on me?"

Once it was secured around her neck, she settled back against him on the couch – the couch that Steve would never be able to look at the same way again.

"You know, we should do Grease for Halloween."

"What?"

"Grease. You can pull off the Danny haircut. I mean, you basically

had it down last year. And I can pull off a Sandy outfit. I think. As long as no one cares that I won't be blond."

Steve couldn't even remember the last time Jessica had dressed up for Halloween. She usually stayed home and gave out candy.

"I mean, if you want to, I think I could do it."

"Good."

---

Okay, so . . . if you read the smut . . . YIKES, I don't know how I feel about it. Like . . . I used to write it well, I think, and then I got out of it for a while, but Steve makes me feel some type of way, and now I'm suddenly writing it again? Let me know what you think?

## 25. Chapter 25

### Chapter Twenty-Five

The few weeks after Jessica's birthday party passed pretty quickly. Jessica still worked at least three times a week; Steve still had baseball practice after school. He had games now, usually on the weekends. He was kept busy keeping up with school work now that his weekends were full.

Jessica was able to come to most of his games, and she didn't mind them. They were held outside so it wasn't as packed even if a lot of people did come to the games, and it wasn't as loud as basketball had been.

Nothing had changed since the night of her party, aside from the fact that they were closer now. Sometimes Steve woke up in the morning and she would be able to feel his hardness against her. It had happened before, but now he never tried to hide it from her. He knew it was okay.

It was now a week away from Easter break, and Jessica knew it was time to ask her mom if it was okay to go with Steve. Yes, she had put it off until now. Not really because she didn't think her mom wouldn't let her go, but . . . what if she didn't?

It was after school. She didn't have to work and Steve had baseball practice, so it was the perfect time. Her mom was in the living room, doing some kind of knitting thing when Jessica came in from school and sat down with her.

"Hey, mom?"

"Hm?"

"Um . . . Steve invited me to come to his parents' lake house with him over Spring break. I'd – I'd really like to go if it's okay. His parents will be there, but I mean, you know how they are. He'll still be basically alone even if they're there the whole time."

Her mom had stopped doing what she was doing and was now looking at her.

"I don't want you gone on Easter."

"I – I'm sure I could get back here for Sunday. If that's the only thing bothering you, I mean, Steve will get me back here. He just doesn't wanna be alone. I don't want him alone, not for a whole week."

Jessica noticed that her mom was really looking at her; she didn't really like it. Then her mom sighed.

"You're right. I do know how his parents are. You two will be alone in that house for the most part. I feel that I can't stop you from going. You are an adult, and I'll respect your decision if you want to go. But be careful."

"Mom, of course I'll be careful. Steve will be there. He won't –"

"Exactly. Steve will be there. So . . . be careful."

That's when she got it. Her mom wasn't asking her to be careful, in general. It wasn't like she was worried about her safety, not in this instance. She was telling her to be careful because she and Steve were going to be basically alone for a week, and, well, stuff could happen.

Stuff probably would happen, to be honest, and she kind of wanted to talk to Steve about it beforehand, but it was weird that her mom was just so openly talking about it.

"Mom!"

"Don't 'Mom' me. You're eighteen, and don't think I don't know something happened at your party last month. You both came back glowing."

Jessica felt her cheeks get warm. She was probably glowing now, just not for the same reason. She and Steve had messed around a few more times since the party, but they still didn't get much time alone due to their busy schedules.

"I just don't want you to come back . . . in trouble."

"You mean pregnant. I wouldn't let that happen. Steve wouldn't let that happen. He – we still haven't –" She broke off, hating that she was starting to stumble over her words. "I'll make him buy condoms, okay!"

Her mother grinned at her outburst, and that was when Jessica realized that her mom was enjoying her embarrassment.

"You just make sure he uses them."

Jessica shot up off the couch and headed for the stairs. She needed to go and learn how to breathe properly again. She also wanted to get her head back on straight before Dustin came home. He would definitely notice her face being red if she was still thinking about her conversation with her mother, and he'd want to know what was up.

---

Jessica was doing her homework when Dustin got home. She had cooled off a little, which was good, because he poked his head in her doorway as he was making his way to his room.

"Oh, uh, hey," she said, "I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

She gestured to the bed for him to sit down, so he did.

"Spring break. I'm gonna be with Steve."

"So what? You're always with Steve."

"Yeah, but I mean, I'm gonna not be here. We're going to his family's lake house. I'll be back for Easter Sunday."

Dustin's eyes widened. "You're going away with him? Alone?"

"Well, technically, his parents will be there." She gave him a sheepish smile. "But yeah, alone."

"But we usually do stuff together during Spring break. You take me to the bookstore and buy me comics, and we usually go to the movies, and we play games."



This was why she wanted to talk to Dustin about Spring break. They usually spent it together; they even went shopping with their mom for groceries for Easter Sunday, and the book store he was talking about was a couple of towns over. She knew their mom wouldn't take him.

"Well, it's still a week away. I can take you to the bookstore next week, on a day I'm not working. And . . . we can go see a movie this weekend if you want. I'll even take you to the arcade sometime and we can play."

"Well . . . Friday the 13th is out now. I want to see it, but it's rated R. I can only go if an adult is with me . . ."

She was not much into slasher flicks; they were too gory for her taste, but . . . it was the fourth movie of the franchise and he had seen the other three.

"You want it to be just us or do you want to invite the others?"

"It's always just us," he said. "And if you're going to be gone . . ."

She did feel kind of bad for planning on leaving him alone for the week, but it wasn't like he wouldn't have his friends. They would be able to hang out even more over break with her not being there.

"Okay. We can go Saturday. How's that sound?"

"Sure."

"Cool. You wanna hang out in here for a while? Steve won't be here for another hour at least."

Dustin, who still had his bookbag with him, pulled out one of his school books and they did their homework together. Dustin was always good at science and he liked history and English, but he sometimes had trouble with math, especially since they were now getting into pre-Algebra and adding letters to the mix. He would eventually get the hang of it, though, because he was a quick study.

---

Steve was a little late getting to Jessica's house. He had stopped by a

diner to pick up dinner for all of them. Hamburgers and French fries for him and Dustin, chicken fingers and a baked potato for Jess, and a chicken sandwich and fries for her mom.

They ate at the kitchen table, Steve and Jessica on one side while Dustin and Ms. Henderson took the other side.

"So, Mom said I could go with you," Jessica said, gently nudging him in the side. "To the lake house."

"Really?"

He looked at Ms. Henderson and she nodded. She had a small smile going, which he returned hesitantly.

"My only condition is that she has to be back by Easter Sunday."

"Oh, yeah, sure." He would do anything if it meant she could go with them. "Um –"

"Okay. Obviously, that means you are welcome here that day."

Steve's parents didn't really celebrate Easter, so that worked for him. Even if they had, Steve would have preferred dinner with Jessica and her family. It was just less stressful and just all around better than anything he did with his family.

"Thanks," he said.

Jessica pressed her leg against his briefly and he turned to grin at her. She was already smiling his way.

"But I get her next week," Dustin said. "Spring break is usually ours. You're kind of stealing her."

"Yeah, we're going to a movie on Saturday. And then sometime next week it's the arcade and a comic book store."

He was glad Dustin was willing to switch things around so Jessica could go with him, but he also felt kind of bad for making them break tradition. Not bad enough to go without her, though, now that he knew her mom was letting her go.

After dinner, Steve and Jessica decided to go upstairs. Steve still had homework to do, and her room was the best bet of it being quiet enough for him to concentrate.

Jessica took his hand as they began climbing the stairs and she took a slight lead in going up.

"So . . . Mom had one other condition – I mean, it was more sort of a suggestion, really."

"Okay, sure."

"She made me – she made me promise to tell you to buy condoms," she said quickly.

Steve had not expected that. It surprised him so much he missed one of the steps going up, and his foot caught against the edge of it. Then he was toppling forward right into Jessica, and because he was holding her hand, he couldn't really catch himself all that well, and then she was toppling forward. They both yelped as they landed in an awkward heap on the staircase.

Jessica had landed on the stairs themselves, body facing forward, so Steve had landed half on top of her, most of his weight on her lower half.

He heard the tread of footsteps and then heard, "How did you guys fall going up the stairs?"

Dustin.

"Ask Steve," Jessica said from underneath him. There was amusement in her voice and he felt as she laughed a little.

Steve moved to get off of her and realized he'd never let go of her hand.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"Yeah. I'm good. I didn't have far to fall."

He stood up then, and helped her back up as well. Dustin was still at

the foot of the stairs.

"So . . . how did you fall going up the stairs?"

"Ask your sister."

"Nope. You fell on top of me, so you get to answer this one."

And the thing was Steve knew that Dustin was an adamant little thing, so he wouldn't stop until he got a satisfactory answer.

Jessica's mom had come around the corner then, mostly to make sure everyone was okay. The fact that Jessica was still laughing a little made her mom smile before going back to whatever she had been doing.

"Steve?" Dustin again.

"Jess said something that distracted me. I wasn't paying attention."

"What, did you forget you were on the stairs?"

"No, look, she just surprised me. No big deal."

"Uh-huh."

Dustin shook his head and turned back to go to the living room, and as soon as he was out of sight Jessica grabbed onto his arm and burst out into real laughter.

In a hushed voice, Steve said, "Your mom did not say that."

"Oh, yes she did. She knows we're going to be alone and the words she used were that she wanted us to be careful."

Steve's heart kind of dropped into his stomach. He suddenly wondered if Jessica thought he'd only asked her to go with him so they could have sex. They would be mostly alone for a whole week, so it was likely to happen, he wasn't naïve. And if Jessica was okay with it happening, he was all for it, but he didn't want her thinking that was the only reason he wanted her there.

"We need to talk," he said, this time grabbing her hand and taking the lead.

He led them to her room. Once they were in it, he shut the door even though he knew he wasn't supposed to.

"Uh –"

"It's just for a few minutes. I don't want to take a chance on anyone hearing us."

Steve sat on the bed and she followed suit.

"Steve?"

"Jess, you know that nothing has to happen on this trip, right? Like, obviously, if it does, then . . . it's – it'll be great. But I don't – I didn't ask you to come with me just so you'd have sex with me."

Jessica's cheeks turned pink when he said the word sex. It was kind of cute.

"I know that. I also know that nothing has to happen. But you still need to, you know, just in case."

The truth was that the few times they had messed around since her party, he still hadn't really touched her. It usually started off the same way, with them grinding against each other, and her getting really worked up, which got him more worked up than he already would be at that point. She had taken her shirt off once when they had been in his car one night after a dinner date, when they had driven to the quarry and parked. She had worn a skirt that night; all he'd had to do was slip his hand underneath and that was that.

There had been one time she'd been at his house again and she had ended up straddling his lap – and, boy, had he liked that – and she'd had the perfect angle to bring herself off just by grinding on him. She had also had the perfect angle to get him off and he'd ended up coming in his pants. He hadn't done that in he didn't know how long, but she'd definitely set him off.

He knew it was probably a cliché, but he liked the innocence of her

exploring and learning what she liked and he was so glad he got to be the one she was learning with. She hadn't been mad or disgusted by him making a mess either; she'd actually been a little excited that she could make him do that without really touching him.

Things had been building, though, and there was a definite chance that something could happen over the trip, and so he knew she was right.

They would be careful.

---

Saturday came around quickly and, as promised, Jessica took Dustin to the movies to see Friday the 13th. She was not the only person who had a younger person with her. She had already seen the first three movies of the franchise – mostly because of Dustin – so she was caught up on what had happened.

She got their tickets and then bought a medium popcorn and two medium drinks. She let Dustin lead and she sat where he wanted to. They ended up somewhere in the middle, which was fine with her.

The fourth movie started off where the third had left off. Jason Vorhees had been killed in a barn and now he was being picked up and taken to the hospital morgue. Of course, he didn't stay dead.

Within five minutes, two people were already going at it and it wasn't too much longer after that that they died. One of them had his head pretty much wrenched off; the other was stabbed. Jessica cringed both times and every other time someone was killed. She didn't understand why she could watch a movie like The Evil Dead and it not bother her at all, but this was bothering her.

The whole movie was about a group of teenagers renting a lake house beside a family who lived there year-round. The family consisted of a mom, a sister, and a younger brother. At one point, the group of teens went skinny dipping and it showed the girls' breasts.

Jessica quickly clapped a hand over Dustin's eyes so he couldn't see.

"Ow!" he complained.

"Sorry. Keep your eyes closed."

There were other scenes she didn't want him seeing either and she was kind of regretting taking him to that particular movie.

Near the end, Jason's mask was knocked off by a machete and his deformed face was revealed. He was stabbed in the side of the head and he fell to the floor, the handle of the blade catching and making his face slide down slowly. It had been in his eye, too.

Jessica turned her head from the screen. "Ugh!"

Dustin found it hilarious that she couldn't watch certain parts without either half covering her eyes or turning from the screen completely. She didn't find it hilarious at all and was relieved when the movie was finally over.

She was suddenly very aware of why she usually did homework or read a book or found some way to distract herself when her brother watched the other three Jason movies at home. She did not like the murder scenes.

"I feel like I need to bleach my brain," she said. "Yours too. I didn't know there would be so much nakedness."

Dustin rolled his eyes. "I literally don't care."

Jessica laughed. It was true. Dustin was more into science and fantasy at the moment to worry about what girls looked like.

It was actually a relief.

## 26. Chapter 26

### Chapter Twenty-Six

The next week of school dragged by, mostly because Jessica and Steve were waiting for Friday to come so they could leave and have the next week together at the lake house.

She had taken Dustin to the arcade on Tuesday, where he had undecidedly let her know that she sucked at video games of all sorts. She was okay at Pac-man, but that was about it, and even then, her score wasn't anything to brag about. Then on Thursday, she took him to the comic book store and she bought him a new Superman comic and a new X-Men comic.

When Friday finally got there most of the teachers were basically warning the students that once they came back from break they would begin studying for their final exams, which basically meant they needed to refresh themselves on what they had learned that year.

Jessica knew she would have no problem, but Steve kind of freaked out about having to remember everything.

"It'll be okay. We'll study together."

Steve was walking her to her car like he normally did after school, and she grabbed his hand now to twine their fingers together. Steve had been getting more and more down on himself about school work, and she thought she knew why. He'd never really cared about his grades before, but now that he did, he realized it wasn't easy keeping them up. Plus, he wanted to be able to apply to colleges next year, and that was stressing him out too. He knew there would be placement tests and essays to write, and he didn't want to have to do either.

"Steve?" They had reached her car now, so she pulled him closer. "You realize that since you've been with me that you've brought each of your classes up a letter grade, right?"



"Well, yeah, but –"

"That means you almost have a 3.0 GPA. It's not perfect, but it's still good. You're doing good."

The stress in his face began to fade away and he wrapped his arms around her. She willingly rested her head against his chest and began to smile.

"I just – my parents are going to be with us tonight and tomorrow and I just know my dad's gonna say something. He always does."

"Well, he's not my dad. I can tell him to shove it, if you need me to."

His chest vibrated with laughter and his arms tightened around her briefly.

"I love you," he said.

"Love you, too."

"Hey, uh, do you think you can bring that blue dress you have? The one you wore on Valentine's Day? We have to have dinner with my dad's business partners tomorrow night and it's kind of a formal thing."

"Sure."

"It'll only be an hour or two and then it'll be over," Steve said.

Jessica pulled away from him slightly. She knew he would hate whatever time he had to spend around his dad's partners. He hated any time he had to spend thinking about how he might end up working for his dad because that was the only thing he thought was open to him.

"Okay. I'm mostly packed, I'll just add that in when I get home."

"Okay. Be ready to go by five?"

She nodded, kissed him quickly and said, "This is gonna be a good week, even if we do have to go to a business dinner."

"Yeah, okay. We'll just get through tomorrow and everything else will be good."

---

Once Jessica got home, she did what she'd said she would do and put her blue dress in her suitcase to take with her. If she was being honest with herself, she wasn't too happy about having to go to dinner with Steve's parents either – or his co-workers, for that matter – but she was glad that Steve would have a buffer between him and his dad.

After she added her dress to the list of things she was taking with her, she took a brief inventory to make sure she had everything – bathroom things, clothes, any homework her teachers had assigned for the break – and then went down to have a snack with her mom.

"You all set?"

"Mm-hm."

"You call me when you get there, just so I know you did get there."

"Sure."

They continued back and forth like that until Dustin got home and then he came and sat with them in the kitchen. He normally would've just gone to his room – Jessica would've been on her way to work on most Friday's – and then he would've been off to Mike's to meet up with his friends.

Since she was leaving that day, however, both her mom and her brother were waiting with her for Steve to pick her up. She'd never been away from her family for any real length of time, and especially not over a holiday, so they were going to sit with her until she left.

---

Steve was right on time to pick Jessica up. He went inside to help her with her things, if she needed it, and to say hi and bye to Dustin and Ms. Henderson.

Jessica ended up having a duffle bag and a suitcase, so he took those to the car before heading back inside. Jessica, Dustin, and Ms.

Henderson had already moved to the living room when he'd reached them. Jessica was hugging her mom; once she was done with that she hugged Dustin.

"You almost ready?" he asked after she had let go.

She nodded and gave him a small smile as she moved to his side and grabbed his hand.

"You guys be safe," Ms. Henderson said. "Remember to call when you get there."

"The drive is about three hours," Steve said. "We might not get there until after eight."

Ms. Henderson nodded. "That's fine. I'll be waiting."

"I love you guys."

Once they were in the car and on the road, Jessica grabbed his hand once again.

"I'm glad I'm going with you, but it still feels weird knowing I'm going to be gone all week."

"I get that," Steve said.

Jessica was close with her family. As far as he knew, she'd never been away from them for any real length of time. Even when they happened to go away somewhere over summer vacation or any other holiday, they were always together, they never left anyone behind.

She turned the radio on, setting the volume high enough to hear it but low enough so they could talk if they wanted to.

It was warm enough outside that they could have the windows down a bit, but she didn't want to have to fight her hair later, so she only put hers down about halfway.

"So what do you usually do when you're at the lake house?"

Jessica had never been, so she wasn't sure what to expect.

"Well, we're not so far away from a town that we can't go explore, so there is that. There are places to eat, this one place has the best pizza I've ever had, and we have to go there before we go back home. Hanging out on the pier is cool; it makes you feel like you're moving, but you're really not. There's a path you can walk through around the lake, about a mile or so. It's pretty open, not completely in the woods. But we can still watch movies and stuff, if that's what you want to do."

All that sounded great to Jessica. She knew she'd have a good time no matter what they did because they were going to be together.

---

A couple hours into the trip, Steve had to stop for gas. He picked up a couple sodas at the gas station and a bag of chips for him and Jessica to share. He planned on picking up a pizza from the place he'd mentioned just because they were going to be getting to the house late and he knew his parents would have picked something up already for them. They had actually left earlier that day, before school had even let out, so they were probably already at the lake house.

Jessica had been dozing off and on for the past hour, but she was awake when Steve got back to the car. She gave him a smile when he handed her a Coke. She took a few swallows before closing the bottle back up.

"So what are the sleeping arrangements for this week?" she asked.

Her tone was careful, which Steve picked up on because she was usually really open with him. He was open with her too.

"Uh, honestly, my parents won't care if we share a room. But there's an extra room if you want it."

She shook her head. "No, I was just wondering. I didn't know if sharing would be a problem."

To be completely honest, Steve's dad had given him the sex talk before Steve had even been interested in sex. The year he'd started high school, his dad had set him down and explained stuff that Steve

already knew about, but had basically told him that whenever he did decide to start getting serious with girls to be smart about it. They didn't want him getting some girl in trouble, was what his dad had said.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"Jess."

"I just – did you bring . . . ya know, what Mom said to bring?"

Steve nodded. "Did you think I would forget?"

"No. I just . . ." Steve watched her bite her lip before she took a deep breath. "I mean . . . I know we talked about it a little, but I'm still nervous."

Steve couldn't stop the swell of tenderness that filled his chest as her words reached him. He grabbed her hand and squeezed. He wouldn't admit it out loud, but he was a little nervous too. He loved Jessica; he'd never slept with a girl he cared so much about.

"You know nothing has to happen," he said. "Right? I mean, there is absolutely no pressure."

"I know. I want something to happen. Like I said, I'm just nervous."

"You don't have to be. At least not tonight." Steve grinned. "All that's happening tonight is pizza and sleeping. Maybe kissing."

Most of the tension left Jessica's body as she allowed a few laughs to come out.

"Good to know, I guess."

"Yup. And Jess, you really don't have to be nervous. If at any time you want to stop any of what we're doing, you just say so. Okay? And that's ever, not just the first time. I don't ever want you to feel like you have to do something with me, because you don't."

"I know." This time she squeezed his hand. "I love you."

"Mm. I love you too."

---

By the time they arrived at the lake house, it was after eight just like Steve had said it would be. They had picked up a large pizza, but Jessica called her mom before they started eating.

Steve's parents had already eaten and they were seated in the living room with the TV on. Jessica noticed that they were sitting together but not super close, not like Jessica and Steve would've been sitting. She would've been leaning against him and he would've had an arm around her, holding her close to his side. There was none of that intimacy between his parents.

Mr. Harrington had a small tumbler of scotch in his hand, while Mrs. Harrington had a half-filled glass of wine.

Steve and Jessica decided to eat in the kitchen where they wouldn't be disturbed or do any disturbing themselves.

"So, what do you want to do tomorrow?" Steve asked as he got two plates down from a shelf.

Jessica shrugged. "The pier sounded like a good idea. Peaceful and relaxing. The walk around the lake sounded good too."

"The dinner starts around seven, so we could do both. Maybe a picnic lunch?"

Jessica nodded. She was not really a nature person, but the picnic by the lake was something she'd never done before, so she was all for it.

After dinner Steve went back out to the car to get their things and then they took them up to his room. The whole house was made in a two-story log cabin type of design, so Steve's room was no different.

The room was only slightly smaller than his room at his house in Hawkins, but it wasn't as personal as his other room. There weren't any trophies or posters or trinkets from when he used to travel with his parents when they would go on vacation over the summer. It

made sense; his family only used this place for maybe a month out of the whole year; what would be the point in decorating when they spend so little time there?

There was a dresser pressed against the wall, on the right as soon as they walked in, and Steve dropped their suitcases right in front of it. She dropped the dufflebag there as well.

"You can put your stuff in there if you want to. I mean, we're only going to be here for a week, but still . . ."

The only thing Jessica decided to take out of the things she brought was her blue dress. She hung it up in the closet, so that it wouldn't be too wrinkled when she had to wear it tomorrow. In fact, she might even run it through the washer and dryer before dinner to make it look even neater.

They had a few hours to kill before Steve's parents would probably decide to go to bed, so Jessica suggested doing some of the homework they had been assigned over break.

"Jess . . ." Steve pouted playfully. "Why? Break just started."

"I know, but if we get it done this weekend, we have all of next week to do whatever we want. It makes sense in a time management type of way."

So they started on their homework. They both had questions they had to answer for history, which Steve was at least semi-interested in, and it was mostly just review of what they had learned that year.

They didn't have to concentrate that hard to fill out the packet of questions, so Steve put on some music and let it play softly in the background.

"So, why is this dinner a formal one? Where are we going to go?"

"There's a country club close by. They always meet there at least once when we come here."

"Ah, hence the formal wear. Okay. But only for an hour or two, you said?"

"Yup. And most of that will be just my dad going back and forth with his business partners. He'll only include me in the part where he talks about me working for him after I graduate."

Jessica already knew how Steve felt about that. He didn't want to work for his dad at all. She also knew that until recently Steve thought it was his only option. That was before he'd started studying with her and bringing his grades up. Now he really had a shot at getting into a good school, maybe not the best school, but still a good one.

"You know, I think once you start applying and showing how determined you are, he might change his mind about everything."

"That would be nice."

---

Steve's parents were in bed by eleven that night, which left the living room and TV free for him and Jessica to use.

There was a small collection of movies that he and his parents kept at the lake house. He let Jessica choose, so they ended up watching Grease 2. They kept the volume down low, but it didn't keep her from singing along with the songs when they came on.

Once the movie was over and Jessica had finished her one girl show for him, they took it out and put it back in its proper place. There was an old black and white movie on the screen now, but neither of them paid attention to it as Steve began kissing her neck, just small butterfly ones, enough to tickle and make her giggle.

He was encouraged when she turned to him and wrapped her arms around him so she could rub his back. They didn't do much more than kiss, but they did it long enough for Jessica's lips to turn red and become kiss-swollen.

"You really are beautiful, you know," Steve said, to which Jessica shook her head and blushed.

"I'm glad you think that, but pretty sure you have to. You're my boyfriend."



Steve knew she was joking. Many guys had shown interest in her over the years since they had started high school; she had just never shown any interest back.

They stayed up for maybe another half-hour, but then they decided to go to bed. They had a long day ahead.